

24th March 2019 (Third Sunday in Lent, Year C)

Exodus 3:1-8,13-15; Psalm 102(103):1-4,6-8,11; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12; Luke 13:1-9.

Leave it one more year!

The gospel reading this week invites us to meditate on three different stories that speak about repentance. The original Greek word used in this context is *metanoia*, which is more properly translated as 'change of heart.' Jesus insists that unless we change, we will all perish.

The reading starts with a observation about two incidents that had happened in the recent past. There is no other evidence about these two incidents outside today's reading. It was common belief that these, and other incidences that happen around us, are God's way of punishing us. Jesus' answer is very clear: no! Those who die in terrorist acts or natural disasters are no greater sinners than any others who survive.

Jesus uses these two incidents to reflect on a much deeper need, the need for us to repent. Jesus has come to show us a loving and merciful Father who invites us to participate in his divine life, the kingdom of heaven. We are all invited, all are welcome, but not everyone accepts this invitation. Jesus warns us that unless we change our hearts and turn back to God, then we too will perish. The people who died in the incidents referred to by Jesus died a physical death, like we all have to do; but if we do not repent, then we will die a spiritual death and are separated from God forever. Physical death, common destiny of all creation, is the doorway that leads to real life, life in God. If we do not repent we will be dead to God and cannot participate in God's kingdom.

This may come across as a harsh position, but Jesus goes on to explain that all this is in the context of a loving, patient and merciful God. In the third reflection, a parable, Jesus explains that the fig tree, which is often seen as a wild tree, is planted in a vineyard. Vineyards are carefully looked after so that they produce quality grapes and fine wines. Like the fig tree, we are planted in a privileged space; we are privileged because we are given the manure of the word of God and life in the community of faith.

The problem with the fig tree is that it is not producing any fruit! What else does this tree require? It is planted in a special place, well looked after with ample manure and water to encourage it; yet it refuses to cooperate and produce any returns. For some time now (three years) the owner has been coming to look for fruit in this tree, finding none. Since it is not producing fruit, it is only taking up space that can be better used by planting more vines. The person looking after the vineyard intervenes: let us try once more, give me time to dig around it and manure it once again, it may yet produce fruit.

This parable can be seen as a type of allegory. The owner represents God the Father and the person looking after the vineyard represents Jesus. In Jesus we have someone who is ready to intercede for us; Jesus is even ready to trade his life for ours by dying on the cross to obtain our salvation. The Father listens to the Son, and allows us more time for repentance.

We too are given 'one more year' in which to repent and produce fruits of repentance. The year that we have been granted is not twelve months long, but a time of God's grace. We too are constantly being dug around and manured. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether we are responding to these opportunities God is extending to us. Am I open to listen to God as he speaks to me through his word and through his creation? Do I reach out to those around me that remind me of Jesus in the poor and the needy? What fruits am I producing?

Lent is another invitation for us to repent, change our heart, and turn back to God!

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