

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL



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THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

20th March 2022

Luke 13:1 At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Luke 13:6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading interprets the time of the ministry and of the church as the time of opportunity. There are three moments in this Gospel passage:

Pilate’s intervention in the Temple; The collapse of the tower at Siloam; The parable of the fig tree.

The first two belong together; the third is somewhat independent but is a response, at Luke’s hands, to the first two.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

There is a slight tension between the two stories and the parable. The stories are warnings of sudden death, whether by human intervention or chance. The parable, however, is a story of mercy: given that life may end, given that the vineyard owner—God—expects fruitfulness, then, now is the time. However, an ominous layer is implied: the unfruitful person is (literally!) a waste of space.

Thought for the day

We are all aware of the fleeting nature of time and we all have experience of the missed opportunity, the moment of grace—however secular—overlooked. At the same time, we know that our God is the God of second chances and that it is never truly over.

Like Augustine, we hear the insistent murmur, “if not now, when?” That future moment of grace will be just like this one, ordinary, nothing special, fleeting and yet it is the only moment that exists, the “now” of our everyday.

KIERAN O’MAHONY OSA—www.tarsus.ie

The answer of Jesus to the people who asked him to comment on the tragedy in the temple makes us reflect. To begin with, he rejects the traditional belief that all disasters are a punishment of God. Jesus does not think of God as an avenging God, one who goes about punishing his sons and daughters, handing out sickness, accidents, or misfortunes here and there in response to their sins.

Later he takes a different approach. He does not develop confusing theories on the ultimate cause for disasters, by attributing them to the guilt of the victims or the providence of God. Jesus turns his attention to those present and confronts them: take all the incidents as a call from God for your conversion, and change your lives.

We will not discover the crucified God by demanding an explanation from a distant deity, but by identifying ourselves with the victims. We will not find him by accusing him of indifference or denying his existence, but by working together in a thousand ways to alleviate suffering in the world.

Then, perhaps, we will discern between light and shadows, understanding that God is in the victims, honouring their abiding dignity; and, in those who fight against the catastrophe, God is supporting them in their struggle.

JOSÉA PAGOLA—Following in the Footsteps of Jesus, Year C

The scene presented here is one in which Jesus challenges the traditional view that if something bad happens to you then it must be some form of punishment from God. Jesus rejects this idea and instead tells his listeners that any experience of hardship should be a reminder to us of the need for conversion.

This idea is then put beside the idea of God as a gardener who wants to give his plants all the help they need to mature and bear fruit.

This gospel also gets to the heart of what Lent is all about. True repentance, or conversion, is not about being obsessed with sin - it is about recognising where God is at work in our lives and responding to him.

SEAN GOAN – Let the Reader Understand, Year C

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus rejects the idea that personal misfortune is God's punishment for sin. Yet a serious illness or accident can serve as a wake-up call about how we live our lives. How have such experiences given you a greater appreciation of the value of your life and relationships, and of the time, and opportunities at your disposal?
2. "I'll wait till tomorrow to do that". Have you ever said that and then found the chance is gone the next day? In the story we are called to recognise God at work in our lives and respond to Him. NOW is the opportune moment. When have you been glad you did not put off action to the following day?
3. Perhaps there have been times when you saw yourself like the tree in the parable – useless, merely a waste of space, unable to achieve what you wanted. Think of friends who came to you at such a time, people who saw your potential and were prepared to give you another chance, people who also dug the soil around you and gave you the help you needed to grow. Perhaps in your turn you have been able to do this for others.

JOHN BYRNE OSA – Intercom

Gardening Tips

Jesus tells his listeners the parable of the fig tree. It is an appropriate parable for Lent, because it makes us a little bit uncomfortable by challenging us. Jesus invites his listeners to focus on living a full life themselves, rather than spending time wondering whether others deserve their misfortune.

When we hear of tragedies it is often opportunity to reflect on the big questions of life. It is also an invitation to ask ourselves, 'how am I doing?' This is not to beat ourselves over the head, but to make the most of the time that has been given to us. Maybe some extra pruning or nourishment is required. The parable concerns the unfruitfulness of the tree, but it also suggests that there is the opportunity for change. Jesus invites us to the fullness of life.

Using the analogy of the fig tree, reflect on what areas of your life need attention. What nourishment do you really need - for example, rest, prayer, company, exercise or time in nature?

What does fullness of life mean for you? Take time to reflect on this using your journal.

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT – Go Deeper

General Comments

Verses 1 to 5 are in two groups – 1 to 3 and then 4 to 5; they are practically identical, so that reading them together has a cumulative effect on us. Each is based on a tragic incident: Pilate murdering a group of Galileans as they were offering sacrifice in the temple, and a tower falling and killing eighteen people.

You can start your meditation by identifying a moment when you learnt of (or saw on television) a tragedy where there was violence and bloodshed. The tower was probably a religious building, so that both incidents took place in a religious setting. Then identify with the two possible responses: that of the people, and that taught by Jesus. Note the forceful way in which he rejects the first response. Ask yourself when you have experienced that kind of challenge to what was a natural and spontaneous response.

In verses 6 to 9 we have a parable. Interpret it with your feelings. Here again, start with a moment, a time when you or someone else, or a community, had a terrible feeling of uselessness; then identify with the two possible responses, that of the owner, on the one hand, and that of the one who looked after the vineyard, on the other. The designation of one as "owner" and the other as "looking after" is of course highly significant, and the parable is meant to evoke for us a moment of grace, when we experienced the love of God.

Scripture reflection

Lord, there was a time when we felt very vulnerable:

• one of our children had let us down; we were without a job; we realised that we were getting old.

We felt useless, as if someone had come to look at us looking for fruit, and had found none;

as if we were merely taking up ground, and the only thing we deserved was to be cut down and thrown away.

We thank you, Lord, that at such moments you send us friends,

not wishy-washy people who flatter us and pretend that we are without blame, but real friends like Jesus:

they tell us that indeed we deserve to be cut down, but that it is not too late, and we can still bear fruit in the future, and they promise to care for us and help us so that we can make a new start.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL – Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels