

The Central Importance of Repentance

Luke 13:1-9

1 At that very time there were some present who told him 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.”

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.’”

Introduction

This Sunday is the third Sunday in Lent. We are preparing to celebrate Holy Week and Easter, Cross and Resurrection; the biggest mystery of our faith, the mystery of the Resurrection: first of all the resurrection of Jesus but in that and through that resurrection for all of us.

Two weeks ago Francis started preaching in Lent; Francis described our way through Lent as a journey to the Cross and onto the Resurrection. He talked about the story of Jesus facing temptation in the desert. He said it all boils down to three questions; being in the desert means we are confronted with these three questions: who am I? What am I doing here? What will happen when I die?

We are here to find out who we are, what the purpose of our life is so that we are able to know what will happen when we die. We all have to go a spiritual journey starting with these questions. In fact when Jesus rose out of the river Jordan after his baptism his incarnation truly took shape. He still was the Son of God but he joined us in our life walking the same spiritual journey we all have to go answering the same questions when he went into the desert.

Last week we were told that Jesus changed scenes from the desert to the city, to the heart of the matter. Jesus was going to show and explain what is was all about. All the important things happened in Jerusalem. In retrospect we know that Jerusalem was the place where Jesus died on the cross and where his resurrection was situated.

Body

Today's gospel takes us deeper into the learning process that we are undergoing during this Lent period. Last week we heard that Jesus was warned for the fox, Herod. This week we are told about one of the atrocities Pontius Pilate committed. From sources outside the bible we know that unlike most Romans Pilate was not very sensible in respecting religious traditions of the people in occupied lands. On the contrary: he was very willing to use religious feelings to make his punishment or whatever hurt more. For example: he brought the Roman Imperial Standard into Jerusalem, the Aquila, even into the temple grounds, knowing that the Jews would hate it to have this pagan statue on sacred grounds.

In today's story we hear about Jewish people being killed while they were offering sacrifices. This was not only an act of war between enemies, appealing upon nationalistic feelings of the Jewish people; it was made worse because it happened during offering on the altar of God, during their worship. Can you imagine troops storming into our church during the service starting killing people, like we know that a number of years ago archbishop Romero in El Salvador was killed while taking a service.

Luke is the only one to tell us about the biblical incident; we don't have other historical evidence about this occasion. But we do know from other evidence that things like this happened a lot. So Jesus was referring to something that most likely everybody at the time was talking about. The next thing Jesus does is addressing a theological question that in his days was on the minds of many people: Why did this happen to

these men? Why did this happen to the Jews? Did these men commit sins and were punished? Were the Jews punished for their sins?

When something bad happened to you the common thought was that you were punished for your sins. In the Old Testament when the People of Israel left God, worshiped idols, lived the wrong way, the Lord brought in foreign kings with their armies to punish Israel. The friends of Job thought that he was being punished for his sins. When the disciples saw a man who was born blind they asked Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" When anything bad happened to you, people thought that this was God's punishment for your wrongdoings. That was a common well known idea. In today's story people were killed during worship: was that a severe punishment?

Jesus does not even give them time to say yes or no: he immediately says: "Not at all!" But... He takes their minds of the idea of a punishing God. Jesus normally talks about a God who loves us. But still there is that question: Why do we have to suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? A difficult question the Jews still struggle with, we all struggle with. Not so very long ago an American rabbi, Harold S. Kushner, wrote a book about "When bad things happen to good people". As a rabbi he had been with people who were grieving. He tried to comfort them. When his little son was three years old the boy was diagnosed with progeria, a rapid aging disease; he died when he was fourteen. According to Kushner it is not God doing these things or letting these things happen. It is nature being morally blind. Nature, human life, life on earth is not yet perfect. Bad things still happen. As Christians we could say: the Kingdom is coming, it is here already, but it still has to grow. We have to bring God's message all over the world to make sure we reach everyone and every place. Until the Kingdom is completed, bad things happen.

Going back to Jesus when he was asked if the human suffering was punishment of God. "Not at all!", he says, but...

And there comes the big but! You can be sure that if you don't turn back to God, every one of you will also die. He is asking us to do something. And he repeats that message in the second example. A terrible accident: eighteen people were killed when a tower collapsed. We wouldn't think it was God's doing. We would talk about poor engineering or structural failure or fatigue of some kind. Technical answers.

The normal question of the Jews would have been: what did they do wrong to deserve an accident like this? But Jesus tells them they need another approach. They need another focus. If you do not repent and turn round to God you will die as well. That means: if **we** do not repent and turn around to God **we** will die as well. And mind you we are not only talking about the idea of: o.k. we all have to die one day. What Jesus is talking about goes a lot further than that! We will not only die, but we will be dead for ever. If we do not repent and turn round to God there will be no resurrection for us. We can be saved; eternal live in the Kingdom of God is thrown at us. Jesus' death on the cross makes it all possible, will let it all happen. But when our salvation is thrown at us, we have to grab it.

What Jesus does for us, asks for a response. John the Baptist was calling for it out of the desert; all the prophets were shouting about it: repent, turn round, change your lifestyle, change your loyalties, your priorities, your commitments, your chosen purpose in life and follow Jesus. Be the kind of person that God calls you to be. Follow his commandments: love the Lord, your God and love others as yourself. Live by this instruction. God is a God of love; that should be the spirit of our life. If you don't, you're dead... forever... You have to be born again.

If you don't, you're like a tree that is not bearing any fruit; a gardener will chop it down because it is a waste of space. And mind you Jesus is a sensible gardener. He will wait one year for the tree to bear fruit; he will wait two years; he will wait three years for us to bear fruit. And even after that he will listen to advice given and give us another chance to bear fruit. As it is said elsewhere: he will give us chance after chance but it is up to us to respond. There our free will comes in.

Conclusion

Who am I, why am I here, what will happen when I die? I personally find it not easy to go this spiritual journey. It is a big change!

I am the one who gets all the information; I can read the bible, I can listen to Francis when he brings the message, I can look at my sisters and brothers, my fellow Christians, to learn how to live as a Christian. But I have to do it myself, I have to make that choice. I have to repent, i.e. turn round, make a change; I have to confess my sins, i.e. see where I go wrong, what I really need and acknowledge God; I have to go the way Jesus showed us and went himself. And if not: I will die for ever.

Today's gospel is a typical Lent gospel serious business: turn round, to prepare yourself for resurrection, to prepare yourself for Easter. Easter happened to Jesus; it can happen to all of us. But before we can go to Easter, we have to go to the cross. The cross is where we do the dying, lay of the old life and go to Easter to live anew in Christ.

In Isaiah we read today:

“Pay close attention! Come to me and live.”

...

Give up your crooked ways and your evil thoughts.

Return to the Lord our God.

He will be merciful and forgive your sins.

In 1 Corinthians Paul tells us that the 'followers of Moses' went wrong so many times. And that all these examples are there to warn us to do the right thing.

We are given the chance