

## THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

*Gospel: Luke 13:1-9*

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 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. 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

### REFLECTION 1:

### SUFFERING AND SIN

You can well imagine the banner headlines if they had newspapers in Jesus' day – 'RIOT IN JERUSALEM, FIERCE ROMAN RESISTANCE, MANY DEAD'. Then another headline – 'TOWER AT SILOAM COLLAPSES, 18 KILLED'. The Gospel today makes reference to these two disasters. First is the reference to the Galileans whom Pilate murdered in the middle of their sacrifices. Just about this time Pilate had been involved in serious trouble. He had decided rightly that Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply. He proposed to build it and finance it by certain Temple funds; it was a laudable enterprise and a more than justifiable expenditure. But the very idea of spending Temple funds like that enraged the Jews. Then when mobs gathered to protest, Pilate instructed his soldiers to mingle with the crowds and to wear clothes over their battle dress as a disguise. They were instructed to carry cudgels instead of swords. Then at a given signal they were to fall on the mob with violence far beyond their instructions and a considerable number of people, including some Galileans, lost their lives.

The eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell, is somewhat obscure. It has been suggested that they had started work on Pilate's aqueducts and a tower accidentally collapsed at Siloam crushing 18 workers.

But there is more than a historical problem in this passage. The Jews rigidly connected sin with suffering. Eliphaz had long ago asked Job a question 'Who that is innocent ever perished?' (Job 4:7). This was a cruel and heartbreaking belief that Jesus utterly denied in the case of the individual. But Jesus went on to say that if his hearers did not repent they too would perish. Jesus knew well that if the Jews went on with their intrigues, their rebelliousness and political ambitions they were simply going to commit national suicide. He knew that in the end Rome would step in and obliterate the nation; and that is precisely that had happened in AD 70. So what Jesus meant was that if the Jewish nation kept on seeking an earthly kingdom and rejecting the kingdom of God they could come to only one end. It means that we cannot say that individual suffering and sin are inevitably connected but we can say that national sin and suffering are so connected. The nation that chooses the wrong ways will in the end suffer for it. Only to cite as an example the complete collapse of Nazism in Germany after World War II. What Jesus is saying today is that individuals who are often caught up in situations, which are not of their own making, often suffer through no fault of their own. But the nation he would say is a unit and chooses its own policy. He would caution that it is always dangerous to attribute human suffering to human sin, but always safe to say that the nation that rebels against God is on the way to disaster. It is always Jesus' way to give us chance after chance and that God is infinitely kind to those who fall and rise again. We must all learn from growing things. The story of the fig tree that gets another chance, even after three years care, is a picture of the patience and mercy of Jesus. We should think of the patience of Christ as an opportunity to be shared. 'Die where I may', said Abraham Lincoln, 'I want it said of me that I

plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow'. As the Psalmist expressed it, 'The Lord is compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy'. (Ps 102:8)

## **REFLECTION 2:**

## **REPENTANCE**

At first glance, today's Gospel from Luke may sound like a 'can-you-top-that' contest. When those in the audience told Jesus about the murdered Galileans, Jesus matched their story with one of his own - that of the 18 people who had died tragically in Siloam. Actually both disasters recorded only by Luke were twinned by the evangelist with the parable of the fig-tree in order to underscore the urgency and importance of repentance. What had happened was this. Pilate had been involved at this time with providing a new and improved water supply for the citizens of Jerusalem. He proposed to finance the project with money from the coffers of the Temple. It looked like a laudable, worthy expenditure. However, the very idea of spending Temple monies in this way was repugnant to the Jews. Consequently, a mass protest gathered in the city. To oppose it Pilate ordered his soldiers to mingle with the mob and to carry cudgels rather than swords under their cloaks. Then at a given signal they were to fall on the crowds and disperse them. Unfortunately, the soldiers went far beyond their mandate and with their cudgels massacred many including some Galileans. This horrific incident alienated Herod from the Roman Governor later healed by Pilate's sending Jesus to Herod for trial (Lc 23).

As regards the 18 on whom the tower of Siloam fell, it has been suggested that they were working on Pilate's hated aqueducts when the scaffolding collapsed. The Jews asserted that any wages earned on the project was money stolen from the Temple treasury and the 18 killed were only getting the just retribution for their 'sin'. Jesus robustly denied such a connection as we know from the lives of the Saints who often suffered a great deal before entering their glory.

Throughout the Old Testament, especially in the writings of the prophets, the fig-tree in today's Gospel was a symbol of Israel and God's chosen ones. Botanically a fig-tree was expected to produce fruit three years after planting. Should it fail to produce fruit after that time, it was to be cut down and replaced by another. In Jesus' parable the vinedresser allows the barren unproductive tree a fourth year, another year of grace, a last chance. Jesus is the vinedresser and he has now arrived at the eleventh hour for people to reform their lives, craving his listeners to embrace him as their Messiah and Saviour, otherwise they would be in the same sorry condition as the fig tree. Unlike the Galileans in the construction tragedy and the people who were massacred by the Romans, who had no chance of a second, third or even a fourth chance, Israel had received many invitations for growth and fruitful repentance but they had ignored the signs of the times, only the mercy of God could save them. The parable warned Luke's community of the 80s and us in the 21st century against inactivity and indifference while awaiting the return of the Lord. The parable continues to speak to all who think the lifetime process of conversion can begin tomorrow!