

Third Sunday of Lent February 28, 2016

Exodus 3:1-8a,13-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,1-12; Luke 13:1-9

The liturgy of the Third Sunday of Lent begins by acknowledging God's holiness and his claim on us that we belong to him. It recognizes that we are his own people, and must live in a way that reflects his holiness. God offers us the gift of faith as our path towards holiness. At the same time we all want and desire to live a peaceful life. We all want to make sense of our existence. We all desire to live a life where we can make a positive contribution to ourselves, to our families and to those around us. Challenges are always with us, difficulties surround us. However the more we long, desire and develop a personal and ultimate relationship with Jesus Christ as our best friend, there is absolutely nothing that we cannot face and overcome. Indeed we become the "power and the wisdom of God". In this season of Lent, we prepare for the feast of Easter by trying to purify our body and spirit, in order to abundantly receive the fruits of the Redemption of the Lord. Today the church invites us to reflect on the urgency of repentance in an attempt to enhance our Christian lives. For us Christians lent is a time for serious, disciplined self-examination, a time spent in intensive prayer and repentance before the cross of Calvary. God personally calls each one of us to return to Him with all our hearts, with fasting, prayer and total surrender to him.

During this time of Lent there is an invitation to examine our lives and change for the better through a process of repentance and the need for the transformation of heart. One of the recurrent themes throughout the Lenten season is the compassion and mercy of our God. It is something that we constantly need to be reminded about. Repentance entails the recognition of areas of unfaithfulness in our lives and being ready to make reparations. Repentance demands that we become honest to ourselves and recognise our unfruitfulness. Once we have accepted this change in our lives God has a ready mission for us. He wants us to fulfil his task on earth namely to proclaim the kingdom of God. Thus today's readings are directing us to take a look at ourselves. In the parable in the Gospel of today, Jesus speaks of the tree which is alive but it does not fulfil its duty of bearing fruit. There is a demand that it should be cut down. The man responsible for the tree requests the owner to give it one more opportunity to fulfil its purpose. If after that, there is still no fruit, it should be cut down. Moses in the first reading is given the task of taking care of the people of Israel now in slavery and to bring them to the Promised Land. Paul in the second reading invites people to appreciate and respond to Christ's saving acts.

The First Reading taken from the Book of Exodus, tells us about the deep concern of God towards his people suffering in Egypt. He sees the hardships experienced by his chosen people and observes their misery. He had heard their cries of misery and takes initiative to liberate them from the Egyptian masters. The passage also narrates the wonderful experience of Moses at the Burning Bush. When Moses encountered God in the burning bush he was just an ordinary shepherd caring his father in law's sheep. God revealed his self to Moses in the burning bush as he reveals himself to us today. God showed him his power in the fire that burns and not consumes. Fire is the image of God and expresses his divine presence. He had run away from Egypt and he was very conscious of his own shortcomings. He had no great gift to talk about God or any one for he had a speech defect. Moses had his own way of life, plans, preferences and ideas that determined his course of action. But once he confronted God he never hesitated to respond to his call. God placed before him the situation of Egypt and that He was fully aware of the untold suffering of His people. God wanted him to go to Egypt and fulfil his mission. Having encountered God, Moses was willing and was more than ready to help the suffering people. The message is clear that God will make use of us when necessary for his mission.

In the Second Reading taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul provides us with more information about God's people. God took the initiative to free His people from slavery. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food in the desert. They all drank the same spiritual drink which God gave them. But, even though they were God's people, he was not pleased with most of them for their behaviour. He struck them down in the wilderness, tested them and they remained there for forty years. These things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. And we should not complain about this righteousness of God. Those who complained in the days of Moses, they were destroyed by the Destroyer. Paul says that these things happened to serve as a lesson. He tells the Christians to avoid all areas of over confidence. They have been baptized, they have faith but more is needed. They have to obey what God has asked them to do. So he admonishes them, if we think we are standing, we better watch out that we do not fall. He asks them to have an honest look at themselves and consider their Christian attitude to life.

Jesus in the Gospel invites all men and women to repentance and conversion of heart. In today's Gospel, some people approach Jesus and tell him of how some Galileans had been killed by Roman soldiers in the Temple sanctuary. It was said that Pilate had built the much needed aqueducts in Jerusalem using the Temple money. The Galileans were angry at this and they protested. Pilate sent the soldiers

to mingle among them during the festival and had them killed for their revolt. Jesus seems to be aware of the tragedy. History, of course, says nothing of Pilate's act here mentioned. Pilate's rule was marked by cruelty toward Jews, and contempt for their religious views and rites. Now Jesus responds by taking another track altogether. Instead, he mentions another incident, apparently a pure accident when a building fell on some purely innocent people and killed many. Jesus asks his questioners whether it is their sin that brought the innocent people to death. In fact, Jesus provides us with the reason for this disproportion between misdeeds and punishment: "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." It was as if he had said: the misfortune that befell these people serves as an example and a warning to them who were listening to him. He wanted to clear the common belief that such events are acts of punishment by God. Perhaps even more frequently one meets people who ask why a loving God does not prevent such painful things from happening.

The response of Jesus is built around the event, where people are taken away by sudden death. Of this instance, namely the tower of Siloam also, there is no other historic mention. It too was a small incident among the accidents of the day. This tragedy was done by humans. Towers that are built for safety often prove to be men's destruction. Jesus cautioned his hearers not to blame great sufferers, as if they were therefore to be considered great sinners. When on earth no place or employment can be considered secure from the stroke of death, we should consider the sudden removal of others as warnings to ourselves. On these accounts Christ founded a call to repentance. The same Jesus bids his listeners to repent, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand; or again he called them to repent, for otherwise they too shall perish. This also brings to our mind the problem of suffering why God allows people to suffer. Jesus answered them: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." He called them to be always ready to face God and face the eventualities of life. The point is clear. Tragedies do occur, whether intentionally by oppressive governors such as Pilate or accidentally by imperfections in the kind of world we live in. In neither case must one conclude that tragedies are necessarily an indication of divine judgment against sinners. Rather, in view of the uncertainty of life and the unpredictability of the future one must be warned to examine one's own life and repent in order to be perfect before the Lord.

The Gospel Reading mentions of parable of Jesus namely the unproductive fig tree which stresses God's divine patience and forbearance. This parable immediately follows after Jesus explained that sin is offensive to God, that it deserves severe punishment. Sin is understood as missing the mark and a negation of God's

presence. In the parable that Jesus told, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. When the man went to look at it for a fruit, he found none on it. The tree had now been without fruit for three consecutive years. Finally, tired of that useless tree, the man told the gardener to cut it down. Upon hearing this, the gardener asked the owner to patiently wait another year during which time he would dig around the tree and put manure on it in the hope that it would bear fruit. If that helps after one year and there are fruits on it, good; if not, then it should be cut down. The fig tree was a favourite tree of the Jews. It was a tree of peace where a happy Jew sat for his regular prayers. Here is the fig tree that had taken so much of nourishment from the soil. At the same time there is not much arable land in Israel. So the fig tree had to justify its existence. The gardener a willingness to be far more patient with the barren fig tree than the tree's owner was. The tree was given additional time to be productive. The point is that there is still time to change but the time is not unlimited. The gardener cannot presume that he can still get the favourable attitude of the master.

In the parable the master had already waited for three years and the gardener asks for another year where it would receive extra care. Here Jesus is issuing a warning to all of us that now it is the time to repent and to change. No one knows when God will call us to ultimate accountability. The fig tree reminds us of two kinds of human persons, those who give and those who take. Those who give symbolise the sacrifice they make and fulfil the purpose of their existence. They give what they have without holding back anything for themselves and this is in generosity. Those who only take have to justify their existence. They have to fulfil their purpose of existence. To accept Christ's message is to be open for conversion and change of heart. It invites the person to bear fruit and fulfil the purpose for which it has been created, namely to give. Repentance or Conversion means to respond to God's care for us, to devote ourselves to a life of vigilance day in and day out and constantly renew our cooperation with God's grace. In cooperating we must be confident as to what we ought to do and how generously we have to perform. The unpredictability of the end and the urgent need for preparedness is a theme of today's Gospel. Jesus' reply would have shocked all. One would expect that Jesus would at least lash out against Pilate and call down curses on such a cruel man. But no such venomous vindictiveness is pronounced against Pilate. Instead he tells the reporters: "unless you repent, you will all perish." They themselves are in need of repentance, implying that Jesus is more concerned about the renewal of the hatred and a vengeful attitude.

The parable of the useless fig tree while it applies directly to the stubborn Jews of Christ's time has a lesson for all times and for all sinners. God's mercy is infinite

but man's earthly life, during which he can obtain the divine mercy, is very finite. God's mercy can forgive sins no matter how grievous but it cannot forgive even less serious sins unless the sinner is sorry and asks for forgiveness. Christ the high priest who is the mediator between god and man is continually interceding for us but unless we do our part of repenting and changing our behaviour, his intercession will be of no avail to us. God does not want anyone to be destroyed but he always respects our freedom and humility to repent. He calls us to be vigilant and alert to listen to him and respond to him. The gardener in the parable is Jesus himself who pleads for us continuously. Every year during the season of lent he gives us new opportunities to come back to him and renew ourselves so that we are worthy of the kingdom.

During this season of lent we ask the grace to live in a continual spirit of renewal and repentance. Repentance demands that we become honest to ourselves and recognise our unfruitfulness and change ourselves to bear the right fruit for God. Moses was asked to change his view and do his mission. Each fig tree is expected to bear fruit that represent the good works and virtues of those who help to build the Body of Christ. Each must answer his calling according to where he has been sent by God. The fig tree is called upon to be generous in the fulfilment of the mission. We have to recognise our nothingness before God and be ready to receive him during this season of lent. It is only after such a serious reflection that we shall have that remorse for our failures. Let us ask ourselves, whether God is using this Lenten Season to shower his abundant graces upon us through Jesus Christ so we will repent and transform our lives.

John D. Rockefeller built the great Standard Oil Empire. Not surprisingly, Rockefeller was a man who demanded high performance from his executives. One day, one of those executives made a two million dollar mistake. Word of the man's enormous error quickly spread and all were scared to meet the boss. One man didn't have any choice, however, since he had an appointment with the boss. So he straightened his shoulders and walked into Rockefeller's office. As he approached Rockefeller's desk, he looked up from the piece of paper on which he was writing. "I guess you've heard about the two million dollar mistake our friend made," he said abruptly. "Yes," the executive said, expecting Rockefeller to explode. "Well, I've been sitting here listing all of our friend's good qualities, and I've discovered that in the past he has made us many more times the amount he lost for us today by his one mistake. His good points far outweigh this one human error. So I think we ought to forgive him, don't you?"

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India