

Lent 3 (c2019)

In John's Gospel, ch. 9, verse 1, the disciples, upon seeing a blind man, ask Jesus, "Master, who has sinned, this man or his parents." In other words, they see the man's blindness as a punishment either for his sins or for those of his parents. I don't think we look at things that way today. When we hear of a plane going down in Ethiopia and all the passengers dying, or of fires in CA and people's homes being destroyed, we don't immediately think that the people on that plane or the persons who lost their homes to fire are being punished for their sins. And it seems that Jesus also thought this way, our way. For here in John's Gospel he says: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him." And in our gospel for today from Luke he cites the example of two tragedies in his own day: Pilate's slaughtering of Galileans worshipping in the temple at Jerusalem, and the other of people killed by a falling tower and says that the people who died in these tragedies were not more sinful than anybody else. That is, he is denying the belief that their tragic deaths were the result of their greater sinfulness. No, he says. They were not more sinful than anyone else.

But then the Lord goes on to say to those questioning him that unless they repent of their sins, they too will perish.

Shortly before this passage in Luke's Gospel Jesus tells his contemporaries that they are very good at knowing what the weather will be like tomorrow and also very practical in settling disputes with their neighbors out of court rather than in court, but they are not good at understanding the new situation his presence, his preaching had created for them. They do not realize that he is calling them to change their lives. They do not realize that if they do not change their lives, they are going to perish.

To reinforce his message, the Lord now tells them this parable of the fig tree which has not borne fruit. The owner of the land on which it is planted wants to cut it down, but a compassionate gardener begs for one more year of care for it. That is your situation, Jesus tells the crowds listening to his words. This is the last year for you. My preaching is the last call. If you do not repent, or, in terms of this parable, if you do not bear fruit, you will be cut down.

The Lord's message remains the same today. His preaching and then his death and resurrection were and are the last call by God to us. And each of us has only one life in which to recognize this fact and mold our lives accordingly. If we fail to do that, we will perish.

The season of Lent is, we could say, one way in which we attempt to correspond to today's Gospel message. We take stock of our lives. We ask ourselves how we must change in order to bear fruit. Have you noticed this year a new spin on Lenten resolutions? Did it come from the Pope? In any case, it would say that instead of giving something up we should resolve to do something good. So a more positive approach. Not giving up something but taking on something. Of course in many cases we need to give up harmful things in our lives. And so we can join this new approach with the traditional one. For example, we could say: I am going to do some kind act rather than some unkind act.

When it comes to Lenten practices not for us as individuals but for us as a community, as the church, it is clear that the present situation in which we find ourselves gives us the reforms which we need to enact. We need to ensure the safety of our children. We need to remove priests and bishops who endanger children. We have a good start in this country with respect to priests. Indeed it is more than a start. It is a policy which has been in place for almost twenty years now. A priest who is credibly accused of abusing a child is permanently removed from priestly ministry, even if the offense took place many years ago and occurred just once. But we

need a similar policy for bishops who did not remove abusive priests.

A second area in which we have to become more conscious of our need to change is the preservation of our planet. Such consciousness was always there but in a more hidden and simply presumed way. We always knew that nature was God's good creation and should be protected by us. But now we are being called to a greater awareness of the harm we can do and indeed have done to nature. Soon, some claim, there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish.

A third area in which we have to become more sensitive is that of gender. We have to attempt to see what is good and what is bad in our contemporary society's views on gender. Some will say that we as a church have much to learn from secular society in this area, but others will claim that we are the only sane people on the block. The truth must lie somewhere in the middle. We can learn but we can also teach.

The Lord's words today are harsh. Given that we are all sinners, there is need for change. But the Lord's statement as to what the

result for us will be if we do not change where and when we ought to change is frightening. He tells us: You will perish.