

**First Impressions    THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT -C-**

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15    Psalm 103    1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12    Luke 13: 1-9

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Imagine if there were modern forms of communication in Jesus' day---radio, television and the internet. Judging from today's gospel, there would be two items at "the top of the news hour." People would also be calling friends and relatives, "Have you heard what happened?" Others would write email and text messages about the recent sad events. Upon hearing the tragic news people would say what we all tend to say at such times, "Oh, what a shame! How terrible! Oh, my gosh!"

What would the current news have been that would have stirred such responses? Judging from the beginning of today's gospel there were two items on everyone's tongues. While they didn't have our modern forms of communication, Jesus' contemporaries knew what had happened and they shared the news with Jesus. Bad news travels fast in any age. People told Jesus about the tyrant Pilate's slaughter of Galileans who went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice in the Temple. Apparently Pilate compounded the brutality by mingling their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. One can only imagine the details of what happened and the sense of outrage, impotency and humiliation the Jewish people would have felt about the murders that were compounded by sacrilege. Unfortunately people then and now were accustomed to the harsh excesses of oppressors.

At least Jesus' contemporaries had a specific human to blame for this first piece of bad news. Jesus mentions a second tragic event that his listeners also knew about; a tower in Siloam had collapsed and 18 people were killed. While the first item of bad news could be blamed on human malice; what would the people have thought about the second? In Jesus' time they would have deduced that God was punishing sinners. It is not unlike what people say these days when tragedy strikes, "What did I do that God is punishing me so?"

Jesus dispels this kink of thinking when he asks if his hearers thought the slaughtered Galileans were "greater sinners than all other Galileans." Or, that the 18 Siloam victims, "were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem." Tragedy didn't happen to those people because they deserved punishment for their

sin. To credit their deaths to their guilt lets others off the hook and leads to fallacious thinking. "I must be doing fine in God's eyes since my life is so good." People who are prosperous or healthy say they are "blessed." It is good to appreciate and be thankful for our lives; but today's gospel suggests a caution. Our prosperity and well being have nothing to do with our virtue, nor is it a reward for goodness. Jesus brushes aside such presumptuous conclusions and challenges his hearers to examine their lives and make changes where necessary. Bad things happen and we can not put off changes we should be making, for we may not have the time we think we have. Life isn't predictable and we can't let our routines and regular daily patterns lull us into complacency. It may be later than we think.

I am reminded of a conversation I had recently with my sister. She told me about a childhood friend of ours who just had a massive heart attack and died. He seemed to have been in good health and had had a recent physical exam that had not indicated any problems. Our friend had no clue that his heart was about to give out. My sister commented, "You just never know what's going to happen. You wake up in the morning and begin your day, but before the day is over, your life can change and never be the same. Poor Vinnie. I bet he woke up and felt fine that day." We all have either had or known about the experience my sister shared with me. Each day is a special gift, but we have no certitude about what the day will bring. Life doesn't come with guarantees.

The real gift of God, Jesus says, isn't our prosperity or that everything is going to go smoothly for us. Rather, God gifts us with mercy and time to change. To emphasize this point Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. In the bible the fig tree often represents Israel (e.g. Jeremiah 24: 1-10). Fig trees required a lot of tending---like the care Israel required and received from God. It took three years for a fig tree to bear fruit---quite an investment of time, money, work and patience! When the owner of the orchard told his gardener to cut down the fig tree, it made perfect horticultural sense since it hadn't borne fruit in the expected three years. "So, cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil." The tree should have been replaced by a new one that would produce fruit in due time. But the gardener gets the owner to allow the tree another year. The fig tree is supposed to bear fruit to fulfill its purpose. A reprieve it given; but there is still a deadline.

What a grace time can be for us....to have space and time to grow, mature spiritually, reform our lives, serve the Lord and remove the obstacles, big and small,

between God and us and between us and others. These are the gifts God offers us by giving us more time. Daily life may seem routine and a hectic grind, but if we open our eyes and reflect, we might see the gracious hand of God reaching out to us through friends and enemies; in the large and small breaks in the routine; in the quiet moments and even the frenetic rush; and in the surprises. God's patience with us is extraordinary. Look at what we humans put Jesus through and still God didn't give up on us; we are graced with time.

However, the parable isn't open-ended. Time does run out, not just in the parable's future, but in our lives--- sometimes in unexpected and even tragic ways. When that happens we might find ourselves emotionally and spiritually unprepared. That's not what God wants for us, hence Jesus' parable offers tolerance and patience before judgment. It is a good parable for Lent and it isn't so much a threat as it is a grace: the year's extension for the fig tree is a grace, because it offers reprieve with time to become fruitful; the warning is also a grace, because it can shake us out of our torpor and stir us to do something. And isn't Lent a good time for such a response from us?

### QUOTABLE

The purpose of the first part of Lent is to bring us to compunction. "Compunction" is etymologically related to the verb "to puncture" and suggests the deflation of our inflated egos, a challenge to any self-deceit about the quality of our lives as disciples of Jesus.

—Mark Seale, in "Assembly", vol. 8, no.3. Quoted in THE LIVING PULPIT, January-March, 2000, page, 33

### JUSTICE NOTES

The most effective answer to this leadership vacuum would be a new era of political activism by ordinary citizens. The biggest, most far-reaching changes of the past century — the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement — were not primarily the result of elective politics, but rather the hard work of committed citizen-activists fed up with the status quo. It's time for thoughtful citizens to turn off their TVs and step into the public arena. Protest. Attend meetings. Circulate petitions. Run for office. I suspect the public right now is way ahead of the politicians when it comes to ideas about creating a more peaceful, more equitable, more intelligent society."

- **Bob Herbert**, *The New York Times*, January 25, 2007

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Jamie L. Smithy #0376917 (On death row since 5/10/96)

Robbie D. Locklear #0246186 (5/14/96)

Archie Billings #0471315 (6/5/96)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

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4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

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If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below.

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Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,  
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