

GOSPEL

LUKE 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him 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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

The Gospel for this third Sunday of Lent speaks to us about God’s mercy and of our conversion. Jesus recounts the parable of the barren fig tree. A man has planted a fig tree in his vineyard, and with great confidence, each summer, he goes in search of its fruits, but he finds none because that tree is barren. Spurred by this disappointment which has recurred for at least three years, the man considers cutting down the fig tree in order to plant another. So he calls the field hand who is in the vineyard and tells him of his disappointment, ordering him to cut down the tree so as not to use up the ground needlessly. But the vinedresser asks the master to be patient and asks him for one more year during which the vinedresser himself would take special and delicate care of the fig tree, so as to stimulate its productivity. This is the parable. What does this parable symbolize? What do the characters in this parable symbolize?

The master represents God the Father and the vinedresser is the image of Jesus, while the fig tree is the symbol of an indifferent and insensitive humanity. Jesus intercedes with the Father in favour of humanity — and he always does so — and implores him to wait and to give it more time so that it may bring forth the fruits of love and justice. The fig tree that the master in the parable wants to uproot represents a sterile existence that is incapable of giving, incapable of doing good. It is the symbol of one who lives for himself, sated and calm, enjoying his own comforts, incapable of turning his gaze and his heart to those beside him who find themselves in conditions of suffering, poverty and hardship. This attitude of selfishness and spiritual barrenness, is compared to the vinedresser’s great love for the fig tree. He asks the master to wait. He is patient, knows how to wait, and devotes his time and his work to it. He promises the master to take special care of that unfortunate tree.

And this vinedresser’s likeness manifests the mercy of God who leaves us time for conversion. We all need to convert ourselves, to take a step forward; and God’s patience and mercy accompanies us in this. Despite the barrenness that marks our lives at times, God is patient and offers us the possibility to change and make progress on the path towards good. However, the deferment requested and received in expectation of the tree bearing fruit also indicates the urgency of conversion. The vinedresser tells the master: “Let it alone, sir, this year also”. The possibility of conversion is not unlimited; thus, it is necessary to seize it immediately; otherwise it might be lost forever. This Lent, we can consider: what do I have to do to draw nearer to the Lord, to convert myself, to “cut out” those things that are not good? “No, no, I will wait for next Lent”. But will I be alive next Lent? Today, let us each think: what must I do before this mercy of God who awaits me and who always forgives? What must I do? We can have great trust in God’s mercy but without abusing it. We must not justify spiritual laziness, but increase our commitment to respond promptly to this mercy with heartfelt sincerity.

During the time of Lent, the Lord invites us to convert. Each of us must feel

addressed by this call, and correct something in our lives, in our way of thinking, of behaving and of living our relationships with others. At the same time, we must imitate the patience of God who trusts in everyone’s ability to “rise again” and to continue the journey. God is Father and does not extinguish the weak flame, but rather, accompanies and cares for those who are weak so that they may gain strength and bring their contribution of love to the community. May the Virgin Mary help us to live these days of preparation for Easter as a time of spiritual renewal and trusting openness to the grace of God and his mercy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How do you understand the concept of sin, and its consequences? What is Jesus’ view?
- Jesus consistently calls us to repentance, but like the gardener, gives us his care, attention and time to do so. In what ways has this been true in your life – how has he cared for you in order to transform your life?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.