

Lent 3

As you may know, on Wednesdays after Mass a few of us gather to study together. Usually we concentrate on a biblical text. The one we are now studying is the New Testament book, the Acts of the Apostles, which biblical scholars tell us is the work of the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. In his Gospel Luke tells us about the life of Jesus; in the Acts he tells us about the life of the early church.

But for the past two months or so we have not met either because of the weather or because of sickness. Unless our memories have been deceiving us, this does not seem to have happened last year or the years before that. Apparently both bad weather and sickness have been more present to us this winter. So we are looking forward to spring and health so that our classes can resume. We are looking for a second chance.

If we wanted to be flip, we could also call this second Sunday of Lent Second Chance Sunday because in today's Gospel the owner of an orchard wants to tear up a fig tree which after three years has not produced any figs. "It is dead," he is thinking to himself.

"Therefore I should remove it because it is simply taking up space,

space which I can use to plant a tree that will produce.” But his gardener asks him to give it one more year. So a second chance for the unproductive tree, but a limited one, for if it does not produce fruit this next year, no doubt the owner will have it removed.

This little story is called a parable, and a parable always has a point. What is the point here? It must be that God will give all of us a second chance as long as we are still alive here on earth. That is a very simple explanation which may be missing some of the meaning of this parable. On the other hand, it does seem to fit with the Church’s teaching about our lives and final judgment. We are taught that the Lord is always ready to forgive us, always ready to give us a second chance. But our lives are limited, and so there comes a point when second chances will no longer apply because we will have completed our journey. Our lives here will be over. And then, according to our faith, there is judgment. The Lord takes what we have given Him and saves whatever He can from it. But if we have given Him nothing, then there is nothing He can save. We will run through God’s hand like sand through open fingers. We will not have given God anything to work with. He will not be able to save us because there will be nothing left to save. Faced with this situation, we ought to make good use of our time here. The commentator William Barclay has the following quotation from

Abraham Lincoln: “Die when I may, I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow.”

This second-chance Sunday also wants to teach us that we should not fall into the trap of identifying misfortune with sinfulness. In the first part of today’s Gospel Jesus draws on two current events to make his point. Again I am relying on William Barclay for this interpretation. Barclay says that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, thought that the city of Jerusalem needed to improve its water system. New aqueducts would have to be built. Pilate decided to finance it with money collected for the Temple. The Jews, the Galilaeans in particular, were outraged by this use of temple money and staged a demonstration. Pilate sent his soldiers among them, with cloaks over their uniforms. Then at a signal they attacked the mob, using cudgels instead of swords. Indeed, this incident could have been what caused Herod and Pilate to become enemies. Now some were saying that the people killed in that attack died because they were greater sinners than everyone else. And in another incident eighteen people were killed when a tower fell on them. Again some wanted to say that these people must have been greater sinners than everyone else. Jesus denies this

understanding of these two events. These people, he says, were no more sinners than the rest of us are.

But beyond that recognition that we are all sinners, we also realize that at times innocent people suffer. That is what the Book of Job teaches us. Job's friends kept telling him that his misfortunes must be God's punishment for his sins, but Job persisted in saying that that was not the case. The innocent do suffer, and there is no explanation for their suffering except faith in God's goodness which will ultimately prevail and reward them. Recently a well-known evangelical preacher pointed a finger at the Haitians, claiming that they were being punished for their sins. That is the exact opposite of what Jesus is teaching us in today's Gospel.

And yet at the same time we have to recognize the fact that evil has its consequences. The people in Haiti suffered more than the people in Chile because their buildings were not built as well as those in Chile. You remember the collapse of schools in China a year or two ago because of faulty building. But the people who died in these buildings were not being punished for their sins. No, they were the victims of other people's sins, the sins of the contractors who built these shabby buildings in Haiti and China, provided of course that they did so intentionally.

As individuals we reap what we sow, both the good and the bad. But at times innocent people are caught up in the sins of the larger groups to which they belong. All Germans suffered the consequences of the evils perpetrated by their Nazi government, even though some Germans were opposed to it and even suffered because of their protest. But, as long as there is life, things can change, and God will offer us, both as individuals and as members of a larger group such as a church or a nation, a second chance. Let us make use of the offer. Like Lincoln, may we pluck the weed and plant the flower while there is still time.