

Third Sunday in Lent - 0800
March 24, 2019
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Reflection:

Today is the third Sunday of Lent, which means that the season is half over. It's a good time for us to consider how our conversions are proceeding. Perhaps you began Lent with a specific goal. The pillars of penitence are prayer, almsgiving and fasting. You might have resolved to spend more time in prayer. Maybe you planned to say the divine mercy chaplet for the salvation of the world, or to become better acquainted with the Lord through spiritual reading. Charity covers a multitude of sins. Maybe you wanted to give more money to the Church or to spend more time with loved ones. Conversion is turning away from your own selfish desires towards God. Maybe you were going to give up something that you like (say chocolate or whiskey), or do something you that don't (exercise comes to mind). Has your penance been fruitful, with an increase in love and joy, peace and patience? Or have you come closer to seeing your own neediness in the spiritual battle, between a willing spirit and a weak flesh? Or maybe you sidled into Lent without a plan, without a goal. It's not too late to start. "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:3)!"

Jesus gives us a sense of urgency in today's Gospel. We hear about "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." God wasn't punishing them for being worse sinners than the others. They died because men can make evil choices.

Exo 3:1-8a, 13-15
Ps 103
1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12
Lk 13:1-9

We hear about the "eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them." God wasn't punishing them either. They died because we live in an orderly world where buildings that have weakened will collapse; a chaotic world of plane crashes and massacres that surprise us with great regularity. They weren't condemned, but they did perish, and Jesus is very clear: "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

He tells us a parable to explain. "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit and found none." The man is God the Father; the fig tree is the ministry of his only begotten Son; his vineyard is Israel, his chosen people. The fruit he was looking for was a converted people, conforming themselves to Christ, showing the fruits of the Holy Spirit: kindness, goodness and faithfulness; gentleness and self-control. The man is impatient: "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down!"

His impatience jars with the image of God that we get from the first reading. He appeared "in a flame of fire out a bush; Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." God attracts with brightness and mystery. He calls with a heat that doesn't cool. His presence looks back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, yet sees ahead to "this my memorial for all generations."

Even his name shows the timeless essence of his being: "I am who I am." God is the fullness of being, but St. John tells us that "God is love (1 Jn 4:8)." He saw the misery of his people, heard their cry, and knew their sufferings in the depths of his omniscience. He came to deliver them, and to bring them to "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The psalmist remembers the God who saves: "He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel." The psalm lists his attributes, and they suggest patience: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

So the question remains: why is the man impatient? Why does he look at the fig tree and say, "Cut it down!" The psalm gives an answer but its truth is veiled: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him." God does love those who fear him, and his love is inexhaustible like the burning bush. He loves all men, but to accept his love, **we** need to catch fire; **we** need to convert; **we** need to repent. Paul reminds us that all his ancestors were "baptised into Moses...all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. Nevertheless [most] were struck down in the wilderness...as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did." We need to learn the fear of the Lord, to be transformed through grace. We only have so much time, and we cannot do it alone.

But the parable tells us that we don't have to do it alone. The fig tree is the ministry of Jesus: his life, words, signs and example. The gardener is Jesus himself. He intercedes for us through his prayers and through his sacrifice. The man says, "Cut it down," but the gardener says, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." We see the gardener digging with sharp iron tools, nurturing the tree with the foul stenching death of manure that brings life. We see the gardener mounted to the tree, iron piercing his hands and feet, iron lancing his sacred heart, giving himself in a death that brings life. Jesus gave himself so that he could send us his Spirit. The fig tree is revealed as the tree of life, the burning bush, the cross. The burning bush is not consumed, and the cross stands before us always in the Eucharist.

For this Eucharist, let us pray that the Holy Spirit might help us in our penitential practice today. Let us pray for the grace to come closer to Christ who comes to us with love and life.