

“A Call to Repent”

And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Mark 13:2-3).

Today, the road to Jerusalem gets very narrow.

As we begin the third week of Lent, our Gospel reading from Luke introduces us to two tragic events, and the first is brought to Jesus’ attention by a group of people who had come to hear Him teach. Luke tells us, “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1). No names are mentioned, few details are disclosed, and yet, in this brief telling, we get a clear sense of the horrific scene they described.

These Galileans had been slaughtered in the Temple by Pilate’s soldiers while they were making their sacrifices to the Lord, and the blasphemous nature of this act was beyond shocking. We don’t know what these Galileans had done, we don’t know anything about the circumstances surrounding Pilate’s profane violation of the Jewish Temple, but a massacre in this most holy place, was just about as sensational and sacrilegious an event as could be imagined, and, as they relayed the news to Jesus, these people fully expected Him to join in their outrage and denounce such a disgraceful act. But with their words still hanging in the air, Jesus does something that none of them could have expected. He turns on *them!* Instead of condemning Pilate, He attacks them for their unspoken conclusions about these killings in the Temple. Jesus said, “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). *And He didn’t stop there!* He continued on by talking about a terrible accident in Jerusalem where a tower had collapsed and killed 18 unsuspecting victims, and, without a hint of sympathy, Jesus says, “do you think that they were all worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:4-5).

What!?! How in the world could Jesus have turned this terrible story of murder back on the messengers who shared it? And how could He be so calloused about the lives lost in such a random and tragic accident? And the truth is, as shocked as His audience must have been in the moment, 2,000 years later, these words from Jesus also leave us with an offended pride and furrowed brow. In a week where we have heard about unspeakable war crimes in Syria, and desperate refugees in Greece; where shootings in Kansas and Washington claimed the lives of eight innocent people; where tornados in Virginia and Louisiana killed six and left hundreds homeless...can you imagine responding to these situations like Jesus responded in our reading from Luke? You would immediately be called a monster and written off as a nut-job! So this begs the question: What could Jesus possibly have meant by such harsh and seemingly insensitive words?

Well, to truly understand the words Jesus speaks in response to these awful occurrences, we have to recognize the natural assumptions that we all bring to our experiences with suffering. You see the people who approached Jesus at the beginning of today’s reading came with a preconceived set of notions about suffering that put them in a dangerous spiritual place. Whether they said it or not, Jesus used this conversation to unmask the sinful framework and false theology that supported their story about the tragedy in the Temple. You see, even in their pity for the victims and outrage at Pilate’s violation of God’s house, somehow, in the back of their minds, they reasoned that these Galileans must have had it coming. I mean, if they were truly God-fearing Jews making sincere sacrifices, then God would never have allowed such a disgraceful act to end their lives. And, if the people who had been

crushed by the collapsing tower had been right with God, then certainly God would have protected them from such a horrible death. They came with a theology of glory that put themselves at the center of everything! In essence they thought that if you were a good person, then God would certainly reward you; and if you were a bad person, then you would receive the punishment you deserved. And this cause and effect theology enabled them to make some sense of suffering and it also enabled them to justify their own position before God...and we do exactly the same thing!

This is such an important reading for us to consider, because human suffering always leaves us with our hands in the air, asking: “Why?” It’s the question Job’s friends tried to answer in the face of his woes, it’s the question asked of Jesus in today’s reading, and it’s the very same question we ask when we find ourselves face to face with tragedy and suffering and loss. *Why?!? Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Why am I being punished by this pain?*

These questions are common to all of us, and they come naturally to us, because, deep down in our heart of hearts, we all think that our salvation somehow depends on us. That if we can just be good, and work hard, and plan well, and do enough to help others, then we will be spared from suffering and rewarded with good things...and this flawed theology quickly leads us away from the Kingdom of God.

You see, the truth is that when our hearts are held up to the light of a holy God who demands perfection (James 2:10), we are not good. Not one of us can claim this. Not one of us can stand before God with clean hands and this self-justifying Old Adam, this natural man that lives in our hearts and desires to be our God, must be put to death. And that is what Jesus is doing when He speaks in today’s reading: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3).

Jesus is not being calloused or insensitive about the people murdered by Pilate or killed by tower in Jerusalem! Instead, He is speaking from a place of ultimate love, and, He is using these horrible tragedies as an occasion to shock dying people into a place of repentance, because it is only in the place of repentance where the grace of God can work. From the beginning of His ministry to its bloody conclusion, Jesus is clear about His work. He came to save sinners! He came to seek the lost! He came to heal the sick and give sight to the blind and restore hope to the hopeless and preach the Good News that we heard earlier in our Old Testament reading that God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked” would turn from their ways and live (Ezekiel 33:11). And, my friends, the pointed words He speaks in today’s Gospel reading show us that *we are the wicked!* That we are the ones who need saving! That we are the lost and hopeless and blind and sick! And when we recognize this truth about ourselves, the word of the Gospel is for us *and it saves us!*

About this Gospel word, Walther writes: “No matter how sick a person may be in his soul, the Gospel can heal him. No matter how deeply a person has fallen into the corruption of sin, the Gospel can pull him out. No matter how troubled, frightened, and afflicted a person may be, the Gospel can comfort him. Whatever the condition in which a person finds himself, even if he is convinced that he must perish because of it... (he can know that) as certainly as God lives, (God) does not want the death of any sinner... (And He promises to us sinners...), ‘You shall not perish; instead, you shall be saved’” (Treasury of Daily Prayer, 212). Today, this is God’s promise to you.

The road to Jerusalem is truly very narrow. It leads us to the cross where we die with Christ. It leads us to the tomb where we are buried with Christ. And, my brothers and sisters, it leads us to the light of resurrection where we will rise with Christ to a life that will never end. In Christ, this is God’s will for us sinners. Go with the peace of this promise, as you walk with Christ on the narrow road. Amen.

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