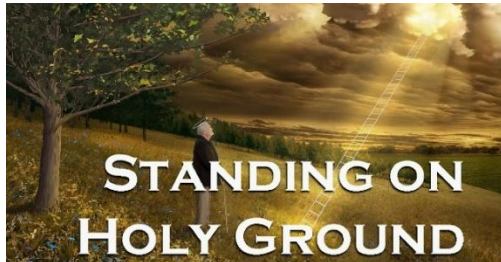


Homily – March 23rd, 2025 – 3rd Sunday of Lent



This gospel episode begins by telling us that Jesus was teaching the crowd. Jesus often targets a particular group with his teaching, like the Scribes or Pharisees or a particular person like a centurion or a leper or a Canaanite woman. But this is not the case here. He is teaching the crowd, which means this teaching is for every person on this earth at all times and in all places including us right here.

Some of the people listening to Jesus told him about a tragic event where some people from Galilee went to the Temple to pray and offer sacrifice. Part of their sacrifice involved the killing of animals. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, sent his troops in to murder these Galileans who were at prayer mingling their blood with the blood of the sacrificed animals. If the sacrificed animals were part of the ritual to atone for one's sins, then the Galileans were murdered as they were repenting. This made the crowd think that these Galileans must have done something unimaginably bad leaving God with no other choice but to strike them down even in the process of having their sins forgiven. Falsely, these people were trying to make a connection between the magnitude of peoples' sins and their tragic fate.

But Jesus doesn't buy the false connections they are making in their narrow minds. Instead, Jesus does something else; he reads their hearts. It's awfully

dangerous to be in Jesus' presence, thinking that if we just keep our mouths shut Jesus will never know what we're actually hiding in our hearts. Jesus is the master at uncovering peoples' hearts. The flaw in those people is a universal flaw, that is, it's hard-wired in all humans.

Haven't we all used a simple cause-and-effect model in our own spiritual lives? Of course, we have. We have all said, at one time or another, "The reason this bad thing is happening to me now is because God is punishing me for some previous sin. The effect, my punishment, was caused by my sin. Had I not ticked off God yesterday, I wouldn't be dealing with God's wrath today." For Jesus, this is not only defective thinking on our part, but it also puts God in a punitive light. A small, punitive god does not exist, but God who is full of mercy and slow to anger does exist.

Before the crowd can reflect on Jesus' correction of their faulty logic, he gives them another example. This example doesn't concern moral evil but involves accidental events. A tower in Jerusalem, the Tower of Siloam, fell on people and ended up killing 18 of them. Jesus asks again, "Do you think for a moment that God was punishing these people because they were worse sinners than all the other people in Jerusalem?" Again, Jesus gives an adamant "No!" to this way of thinking.

Those people in Biblical times are much like a lot of people who live among us—they connect moral and physical incidents to sin, a sin God is very quick to punish. It's almost like Jesus is issuing a command, "Stop that way of thinking right now!"

Now, Jesus turns the tables on his listeners. They are asking about the fate of others, but Jesus forces them to think about their own life situation. Unless they repent, they will all perish like those murdered in the Temple or those killed by the falling tower. How did those people die? They perished quickly, unexpectedly, without warning, and without time to repent. Let's not make the same mistake those people in Biblical times made thinking they had all the time in the world.

Jesus is trying to tell them that their fate is not based on the impulsive and unpredictable whims of Pilate, or Trump or Putin or the stockmarket. No, their faith is very much in their own hands as it is in our hands. Now is the time to repent. We may not be able to stop moral evil or physical evil like faulty engineering that makes towers fall on people or earthquakes or volcanoes or wildfires, etc. But we can repent and change our hearts. We can stop making poor decisions. Jesus tells them as he tells us, "Don't look outside of yourself and speculate about the fate of others and then try to connect this to God. Instead, look inside and get in touch with the will of God." The internet is full of people speculating about world events like as if they know what they are talking about. None of them, except Jesus, speaks about a personal change of heart, a repentance.

Jesus then gives an example of a fig tree that is not bearing figs. The point of life--your life, my life, and the life of the tree--is to bear fruit. This tree is wasting the soil it is planted in. Wasted soil is similar to squandering an inheritance, or a light hidden under a basket, or salt that's lost its flavor. The hard message is: produce

or perish. The gardener asks for more time and more care for this underproducing plant.

There is a saying: if you are struck in the leg with a poison arrow, it is not the time to inquire what type of feathers are on the shaft. That kind of speculating about the feather is not helpful given that fact that you may be dead soon. It's time for action, not speculation.

The gardener in the parable is God. The gardener is willing to do anything and everything for this fig tree to survive and bear figs. God is doing everything in his might that we might bear the fruit we are capable of. But as the saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't force it to drink." Similarly, the plant is given everything. All the plant has to do, to be successful, is to take advantage of everything the farmer is doing for it.

God can only do so much, but if we don't respond, we die. What was the cause of our death? Our failure to respond to everything God gave us.

We can ponder events until we're blue in the face. We can debate these events as blessings or curses from God and whether they deserve reward or punishment until the cows come home. These are theological mind games that stall action. Jesus was not a theologian. But he is someone who is deeply connected to God and deeply concerned about what is happening in the world right now.

Just the ecological crisis alone should make us wake up and pay attention. God, like the gardener, is digging the soil, putting manure around it, giving us more time. But time is not endless. We must change now, or we will perish, not by some sudden tragic event but by our own failure to respond. Like Moses, we are standing on holy ground. Unfortunately, we have no clue how holy it really is.

~Fr. Phil