

C. D'Angelo+
St Thomas's Huron Street
20 March 2022
Lent III
9:30am & 11:00am

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” *May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today's Gospel presents two incidents from the immediate context of the life of Jesus which echo the kinds of terrible events that unfortunately happen in every age and make news headlines on all-too-frequent a basis in our own time.

Though obscure and not elsewhere attested historically, the first may have been an event where Pilate ordered the slaughter of a group of Galileans who persisted in carrying out the sacrifices prescribed by their ancient religious tradition against his wishes. And, the second, the collapse of a tower, the tower of Siloam, perhaps while it was under construction in Jerusalem, killing eighteen people.

On the one hand, we have an instance of a political leader wielding power for his own purposes, brutally slaughtering a group of people who are seen to be in the way of the realization of his ambitions and designs, whatever those may have been. And, on the other hand, we have an instance of an accident, perhaps due to negligence but, whatever the cause, leading to great suffering and the loss of so many irreplaceable human lives. Such events, whether 2000 years ago or today, naturally raise all sorts of questions. And so, some present ask Jesus about these events which must have been weighing on their hearts and minds, just as hearing about such events can make us anxious, drawing attention to the sheer

contingency and unpredictability of things, shaking our own sense of personal security in the face of actions and events that seem so chaotic and out of control.

In response, Jesus directly challenges what would be a misguided interpretation of these events: that because people suffered in these ways, it is a sign that they were worse sinners than others. No, Jesus teaches, horrible events such as these can happen to the good and the wicked, they are not signs of God's approval or disapproval, they are not signs of God's wrathful judgment of what is wrong in the lives of men and women. We cannot interpret such events so thoughtlessly and lazily.

Yet, along with this criticism of wrongheaded interpretations of such events, Jesus adds a challenging, even harsh teaching, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Here, Jesus re-directs those gathered around him and us to set our gaze towards the final judgement where God will decisively separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the evil, where God's purposes in the world will ultimately prevail. He draws our attention to the crucial, urgent need for us to repent in the present moment, while there is still time. And, to assist them and us to do so, he tells a parable.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he commands the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener replies, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." How are we to interpret this parable?

St Augustine interpreted it as containing an outline of three stages of God's dealings with humanity: the age of the patriarchs, the age of the law and the prophets and the age of Christ. For Augustine, "...the tree is the human race. The Lord visited the tree in the time of the patriarchs, as if for the first year. He visited it in the time of the law and the prophets, as if for the second year. Here we are now; with the gospel the third year has dawned. Now it is as though it should have been cut down, but the merciful one intercedes with the merciful one" (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*, Ed. Arthur A Just Jr., InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, p.223). St Cyril of Alexandria likewise identifies the gardener, the vinedresser, with Christ, the merciful one, who "is our Advocate with the Father, our propitiation, and the gardener of our souls. He constantly prunes away whatever is harmful and fills us with...holy seeds so we may produce fruits for him" (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III, Luke*, Ed. Arthur A Just Jr., InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, p.224).

In their interpretations, both St Augustine and St Cyril understood the coming of Christ to be the decisive moment which unveils the underlying meaning of all that happens in history. As they describe, the end has arrived in Christ, who unites heaven and earth, uniting us to God, so that rooted and grounded in him, we might bear fruit that will last. Therefore, along this line of interpretation, to turn away from this goal or purpose shown forth in Christ is to perish and the act of turning away from God's merciful love is what we most need to fear and be anxious about.

When it comes to the time of the patriarchs and the law and the prophets then, though we live in the age of Christ, we can look back retroactively to recognize that, to quote St Paul in today's epistle, "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Once the end, the *telos*, of all things is encountered in Christ, then we can begin to grasp the meaning of what has come before, as well as what happens in our own time and place. This seems to be what Christ means when he spoke those difficult words from today's Gospel saying, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." We encounter the *telos*, the end of all things in him, so now our work is to repent, on which hangs our eternal destiny. Yet, everything hinges on how we hear that call to repent, doesn't it?

Too often, we associate the word 'repent' with the likes of street preachers, standing on the corner at Yonge-Dundas Square indiscriminately shouting a message of God's judgment through a megaphone at any passerby that will listen.

Which is to say, that repentance can have a profoundly negative connotation for us, a term which conjures up images of the judgmental attitude of narrow people, criticizing other people's behaviour at a distance while remaining blind to their own pride and lack of charity towards others. Very simply though, repentance is actually about the direction we are facing, and the direction we are headed in. To repent, as to convert, is simply to turn from whatever has been distracting us, absorbing us, and distorting us back towards God, the merciful one, our source and our end, in whom is found eternal life.

To repent is to seek the face of God: it is a daily and also a lifelong task, which is first made possible by God's movement towards us in Christ, and within us through the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. Yet, we do resist the call to repent and not only because we bristle at how repentance is often spoken about and communicated by others. Our own inner resistance can also come from not fully trusting God's unconditional love for us. This resistance can come from the wrongheaded belief that God is just one more person in our lives who cares more about external behaviour than the deepest things within us. Like Adam and Eve, we come to think that we must hide from God, or at least hide those negative parts of ourselves, because of our weakness and moral failures, because we know that we don't measure up and don't have the power to do so.

Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk, however, has the following to say in his book on prayer aptly titled *Toward God*: "My failures, I must learn, do not separate me from God. What causes the breach is an unwillingness to bring my failures into God's presence.... Renouncing the appearance of virtue and the illusion of innocence is a great advance. Confessing our sinfulness, without dissimulation or exaggeration, comes as a great relief. Somehow it confers an awareness that from the depths of our being we desire God. We begin to experience such love for God that we take no pleasure in our virtue—and are not surprised by our vice. We...move beyond morality into the sphere of a moral personal orientation toward God" (151,155-156).

Indeed, what Christ is calling us to do today is to turn to him, not hiding our faults and contradictions, so that knowing him, his mercy and love, we might not perish in our sins

but instead live to God. Trusting in God's infinite mercy and love by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, may each of us be drawn deeper into the hard yet joyful work of repentance, turning towards the Lord, seeking God's face, this day and evermore. *Amen.*