

Third Sunday of Lent

At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God...A person had a fig tree planted in his orchard: 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So, cut it down. Why should I exhaust the soil?' The gardener replied: 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilise it; it may bear fruit in the future.'

Luke 13, 1-9

At first sight, this gospel reading looks to be made up of two separate and unrelated sections. The first section outlines a discussion between Jesus and some people who wanted to talk about disasters and their causes. The second is a parable about a non-productive fig tree. Both sections are challenges to us to stop and look at the concept of God on which we base our thinking, our religious belief, and our way of conducting our lives.

The people who questioned Jesus about the moral standing of those who were executed by Pilate when they were at prayer and those who died when the tower they were building collapsed seemed to hold the belief that accidents and disasters were God's way of punishing the wicked. That was a popularly held belief in Judaism at the time of Jesus. There are several stories in the Gospels which illustrate how physical disability was attributed to the sinfulness of the person with the disability or to his/her parents.

Is having people executed the way God's view of them is expressed? Is God's opinion of people demonstrated in the accidents that happen to them? Most of us are quick to point out that questions like this, to say the least, are grotesque.

A modern version of the questions put to Jesus would look something like this: Were the 43 people who died in the bridge collapse in Genoa last August all living in sin? Were the 50 people who died in yesterday's flash flooding in Sentani, Papua Province of Indonesia being punished by God for their immorality?

We wonder what it is that motivates people to ask questions like this? What is their image of God? Even allowing that the people who confronted Jesus might well have been hoping that Pilate would add another Galilean (Jesus himself) to his list of victims or that Jesus, too, might have a building collapse on him, we still scratch our heads in puzzlement at people who go on living their lives as though the vindictive God they seem to believe in is not going to obliterate them when they themselves are less than perfect. Perhaps we might just have to be satisfied with the conclusion that the people who ask this kind of question are revealing how they would go about righting the world if they were God. Another interpretation is that we have among us people who, with the best of intentions, use this distorted view of God as a way of motivating others to change their ways. There is at least a hint of this in today's second reading where we hear Paul telling the community in Corinth about some of their ancestors: "Most of them failed to please God, and their corpses littered the desert. These things all happened as warnings for us, not to have the wicked lusts for forbidden things that they had. You must never complain: some of them did, and they were killed by the Angel of Death." That kind of motivational talk might have gotten Paul a role in a Parish Mission Team of the 1950s, but it certainly would not get him a job on the religious education staff of a Catholic school in 2019.

From Paul all the way up this present day, people have slipped into making faulty presuppositions about God. And most of us have probably met people whose God is a cross between a nit-picking bean-counter and Sherlock Holmes. They're the kind of people who give religion a bad name.

In the 1970s and 80s, George McCauley S.J. taught theology and Religious Education at Fordham University. In a delightful piece about people's various images of God, he wrote: "We all have our pet peeves in this matter: A god who whispers in ears. A god of special confidences and secret winks. A competitive god whose pastime is to take on all comers at spiritual arm-wrestling. A god whose chief concern is picking spiritual lint off people, telling them, like your least favourite aunt: 'Don't cross your legs. Sit up straight. Don't be gawking out the window. Where's your watch? Who was that you were just talking to?' A god, finally, who stares into your eyes a lot."

Whatever our current image of God might be, we can be sure that it will change in time. Moreover, we hope it will grow and develop. But it will take more than one Lent or one year for that to happen. Even after a lifetime, we will not be satisfied that we have the "right" image of God. Still, today's readings put before us two (or even three) aspects of God which we have to try to hold in tension. The first reading from Exodus presents us with a God who is interested in social justice: "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings" (Exodus 3, 7). And the gospel offers us both a God of action and a God of mercy: "Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?" (Luke 13, 7). Now there's action for you. But immediately, we hear the gardener bargaining for a stay of violence: "Sir, leave it one more year and give me time to dig round it and manure it: it may bear fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down" (Luke 13, 8-9).

One of the characteristics of Jesus' parables is that they leave us with uncertainty, looking for satisfying resolution. Yet, that is part of their value. They raise questions for us to ponder. Did the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son eventually join the party? What happened when the Samaritan returned to pay the bill for the injured stranger? Did the Samaritan return at all? And in this parable, was the gardener successful in making the fig tree productive, or did he just delay the inevitable? And that last question is significant, because we know that the fig tree will eventually die. Jesus did not say that death would not touch us. But he, the prophets before him and saints and religious leaders after him have reminded us of our social responsibilities: feeding the starving, providing clean water for all, addressing homelessness, protecting the vulnerable and abused, caring for the earth, working to prevent people-trafficking. What is alien to Jesus and the Gospel is sterility and non-productiveness. In this parable of the barren fig tree, we are reminded that death will come to us all but that, in the meantime, we have a responsibility to be productive with the lives and talents with which we have been blessed. If we heed the call of Lent to change our hearts (not just our actions), to allow ourselves to be transformed by the hope that God offers us, we will not stave off the chaos of suffering and death but open ourselves to the one who can nurture us, to the gardener who wants to bring us to blossom. We are the fig tree of the parable, given yet another chance to realise our productive potential.

Let's not forget that this parable is also built on metaphor. The owner and the gardener are two faces of God - the face of justice and the face of mercy. As the parable unfolds, we listen to justice and mercy in dialogue. And the vineyard is a scriptural image for the people of Israel, and, by extension, for the people of God, the Church. If the extraordinary measures proposed by the gardener (mercy) fail, then Mercy will agree to abide by the verdict of Justice (the owner). There is no place in God's kingdom for those who are irredeemably non-productive and sterile. We, the people of God are struggling with the destructive consequences of abuse within our community: the abuse of power, the failure to give recognition and voice to women and men in the pews, sexual abuse. Being the kind of people Jesus invites us to be - people whose productiveness is demonstrated in social action, compassion, welcoming the stranger and the outcast, healing the wounds of abuse - is the fruit for which he is looking. That fruit will be produced only through the severe measures that will bring to all of us a change of heart and the life that issues from that change of heart. Only we, the fig tree, will provide the end to this parable waiting to be completed.