

3 LENT MARCH 7, 2010 CYCLE "C"

TITLE: DON'T DEPEND ON A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

READINGS: Isaiah 55:1-9, Ps. 63:1-8, 1Cor.10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

A preacher ended his service one morning by saying, "Next Sunday, I am going to preach on the subject of liars. As a preparation for my sermon, I would like you all to read Mark 17. On the following Sunday, the preacher rose to begin. Looking out at the congregation he said, "Last week I asked you all to read Mark, Chapter 17. "If you have read the chapter, please raise your hand. Nearly every hand in the congregation went up. Smiling, the preacher said, "You are the very people I want to talk to. Mark has only 16 chapters." Well, I'm not going to talk about liars today, but we do have some very interesting incidents in our readings that we need to consider.

Our first reading from Isaiah is a selection from Second Isaiah and it doesn't treat the Israelites with kid gloves or put anything in a very subtle way. Here we see our prophet pleading for God's people to seek God. "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near." Isa.55:6. You see God's people were in exile and depressed. They felt that God had abandoned them. They were filled with doubt. They were afraid that they were no longer God's people. Isaiah treats them like a mother comforting a scared child, "It will be okay," he encourages and reassures them and he tells them again, "It will be okay." But even in the midst of their emptiness and doubt in this crisis where they find themselves, they still must listen. They must not presume that God is anything but near; they must thirst for God in any and every situation and never give up on God, for God never gives up on them.

In our second reading, we see a similar situation with the Christians in Corinth. They found themselves in a pagan culture full of greed, immorality and idolatry. Paul warns the Christians in Corinth that they must not become idolaters (10:7), not to indulge in sexual immorality (v.8), and not to be vulnerable in the face of testing and temptation (v.13). Stop living the life of the ungodly, says Paul, as an unbelieving Corinthian, and begin living the life of a faithful Christian. Live the life of true repentance!

It is in the Gospel pericope today that we see not only this same theme of faithfulness in the face of crisis and unbelief, but also Jesus reveals to us a very poignant insight. We know Rome ruled Israel during Jesus' time. Israel was a nation suppressed. There was a religious underground which had grown up to fight for freedom. Pontius Pilate, Rome's representative was despised, and he ruled in a ruthless manner. Some people, we're not told who they were, came to see Jesus to discuss an incident in the Temple. Pilate, angered by some situation in Galilee, decided to make an example of a group of Galilean Jews who were visiting and praying in the Temple. He ordered his soldiers to go into the Temple in the middle of the day, when there were thousands of people worshiping there, and execute them.

He was sending the Jews a message: If you do not keep the region of Galilee under control, you will suffer the consequences of Rome's mighty power. It was a strong reminder of the suffering the people of God had to endure. They knew well what it meant to suffer; they had lived through a long history of pain and domination.

What a devastating tragedy Pilate had inflicted on the Jewish people. It must have been similar to the crushing blow to our nation on 9-11. Pilate struck the nation of Israel at the center of its religious and economic life, the Temple. It was a persuasive political message. Every time a Jew entered the Temple to worship he would be reminded that even on the sacred soil of the Temple you are not safe, you are not secure.

So the question on the minds of those who approached Jesus that day and the point they were anxious to remind him of, was the age-old Jewish belief that these people who suffered this terrible fate at Pilate's hands must have been terrible sinners. They in some way deserved it, so they got what they deserved! Never presume you know the answers. Never depend on a false sense of security. Just listen to Jesus: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Lk.13:2-3. Here we see that Jesus gives them both encouragement and a warning. Then he gives them another example; those who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell. They, too, did not suffer that fate because they were sinners. Then he says again, "But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (v.5). If we are to be Christian, Jesus reminds us, we must practice humble and true repentance, or suffer the consequences. Again he gives us encouragement and a warning.

He then gives us the parable of the unproductive fig tree. Instead of being so anxious to cut it down, instead of condemning and judging, we must be like the gardener. Even though the owner (the Jews) want to chop the fig tree down, the gardener (Jesus) wants to save it and help it produce. We cannot assume anyone is a terrible sinner because tragedy befalls them. Assuming blame (cut the tree down) is a way to get the bad stuff away from us. It makes us feel better to know that bad things have some rational reason behind them. So when people talk with Jesus about the cause and effect of a tragic event, he provides comfort and warning, just like Isaiah did in our first reading, and Paul in our second. The comfort is that the people's misfortune is not tied to their behavior, to some perceived lack of righteousness. He is warning us too. For if we have convinced ourselves of presumption or denial, that somehow a person's misfortune is linked to a lack of righteousness, then we are going to face unfortunate judgment, "you will all perish as they did," says Jesus. The condemning sin is not found in the ones who have misfortune fall on them. The sin is found in those who **think** that the sin is found in those who have misfortune fall on them.

Our Lenten season moves along. We continue to approach the cross and resurrection. Our time to prepare and ready ourselves for the great events of our salvation shortens. May this Lent find us good gardeners and bearing fruit for our

Lord not by condemning others, but forgiving, by becoming servants in true repentance. Let us focus our thoughts on heaven and make this Lenten season truly productive. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney