

3RD SUNDAY OF LENT, C

REPENTANCE FROM UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS

“Do you suppose that these Galileans who suffered like this are greater sinners than any other Galileans? They were not, I tell you. No; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did” (Lk. 13: 2)

Our Status Quo: At the back of my mind is the ongoing war in between Russia and Ukraine. A war that is completely unnecessary and could have been avoided if we were our brother’s keepers. This is a war of greed, power, and pride, of one man and his handful oligarchs against a weaker “brother.” When we think of the destructions, the devastations of the nation and displacements of peoples of Ukraine; the lose of lives, especially of the innocent civilians, the children, and their mothers; we certainly turn to Jesus to reports and to question like “the people” in the today’s Gospel (Lk. 9: 1-13). Our world is gripped in fear as she mourns the deaths of these innocent people and grapples with the humanitarian emergency situations that are staring at our faces, calling for global practical response. In the face of these, there are many questions popping up. There are doubts plummeting the faith of some, who may be lost at the seeming silence of the heavens to our prayers. Amid this status quo, the readings of today resonates.

The God, Who Keeps His Covenant: Last week, we were at the “Abraham stage” or “patriarchal stage” of salvation history. The time when God made a Covenant with Abram. A Covenant, within the Old Testament context, was a God-man agreement. If a Covenant treaty was between unequal parties, it was the inferior parties that promised to undertake obligations towards the superior party. But we noted last week that in the Covenant with Abram, it was God who undertakes the obligation of His promises. This is an important and unique component of this Covenant. In today’s First Reading (Ex. 3: 1-8, 13-15), God, mindful of His Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15: 1ff; Ex. 2: 24), appears to Moses in a burning bush, revealing Himself as “I AM WHO I AM” – “I am the God of your father. The God of Abraham, the God Isaac, the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3: 14, 15). Moses is sent on a mission to rescue the children of Abraham from their slave drivers in Egypt. The Israelites were in Egypt for at least four centuries. Even this unfortunate event was part of the divine design (Gen. 15: 13; Ex. 12: 40; Acts 7: 6-7). The Psalmist extols God’s mercy, compassion, forgiveness, steadfastness, and faithfulness. These are the attributes that make God different. He is the Father Who keeps His promises. He will neither forget nor fail in His promises. We pray for the grace to do our part of the Covenant, as the new children of Abraham.

The God, Who Always Means Our Best: Reflecting on the Gospel of today (Luke 13: 1-9), Pope Benedict XVI writes: “Misfortunes, sorrowful events must not awaken curiosity in us or the quest for presumed sins; instead, they must be opportunities for reflection, in order to overcome the illusion of being able to live without God, and to reinforce, with the Lord’s help, the commitment to change our way of life.” This is what Jesus is emphasising means by His interrogations: “Do you think those Galileans who suffered like that were greater sinners than any other Galileans? ... Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them? Do you suppose that they were more guilty than all the other people living in Jerusalem?” Jesus’ answers, which are very similar are revealing: “They were not, I tell you. No; but unless you repent you will perish as they did” (Lk. 13: 2-5). John Bergsma explains this: “Jesus is rebuking a tendency among the Jews of His day, including His disciples, to see one’s fate in death, whether favourable or unfavourable, as a divine assessment of righteousness of one’s life.” God never intends us any harm, instead, God desires the best for us. And even when events turn out as misfortune, like the slavery of the children of Israel in Egypt, God still has the last laugh. He works through crooked lines to write the straight course of our history. Just as through the death of His Only Begotten Son, we have been begotten and saved.

The God of Second Chance: The response of Jesus emphasises the need for us to use the misfortunes of others as reminders for us to repent. This teaching is supported or buttressed with the parable of the fig tree that the gardener pleads with the owner to give him a second chance to nurture and manure for another year. Here, we are the fig tree, who bear no fruits and merit to be cut down. Jesus is the gardener, Who pleads for us, at the Father’s right Hand, to be spared. God concedes. But how do we make use of this opportunity? The time is now. Lent is the favourable time for us to repent and return with our hearts broken, not our garments torn (Joel 2: 13). Scott Hahn clarifies that “Jesus calls us today to “repentance”—not a one-time change of heart, but an ongoing, daily transformation of our lives.” The ongoing war is a strong message for us in the light of the message of the Gospel: the war could be seen as a warning for us. Jesus would ask us: “The millions displaced from their comfort zones and the thousands killed in Ukraine, do you suppose they were more guilty than all the people in Europe? No, they were not. But I tell you, unless you repent ...” For us who are safe and alive, we must accept this as our warning flag. A call for repentance.

My dear friends, the world, as we see today, is unsafe and worrying. There are wars, persecution, inflation, famine, hurricanes, moral decay, and COVID is still lurking around. The easiest reactions to these are doubt and resignation and the God-questions. But as people of faith, we must see beyond the easy ways to some deeper meanings to these global eventualities. They are opportunities for us to reflect on our lives; to be grateful that despite all these we are still here; to repent and turn to God, Who alone can comfort and grant us peace. Let them remind us of the experiences of the children of Israel, among whom God revealed and continues to reveal Himself as a faithful father, Who never deserts His children.