



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 7, 2010
The Third Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 13:1-9

+

TWO DISASTERS AND A PARABLE

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus in today's Gospel makes comments on the victims of two contemporary disasters and then tells a parable about an unfruitful fig tree. In doing so, the Lord – as he has done before – changes questions of religious speculation about other people into a personal, existential challenge.

Some people reported to Jesus that Roman soldiers under Pontius Pilate butchered some Passover pilgrims from Galilee while they were making their sacrifices in the Temple. We do not know Pilate's reason for this atrocity. The Lord was a Galilean Passover pilgrim to Jerusalem at that moment, and he himself would suffer and die under Pontius Pilate. We do know Pilate's reason for the crucifixion: he thought it easier to kill Jesus than to have a hostile crowd incited to riot by their religious leaders.

But Christ's interests were not Pilate's, nor did he indulge speculative curiosity. "Do you think," he asked, "that those Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans because they suffered as they did? I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Then Jesus mentions the fall of the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem killing 18 people. Were these victims worse sinners than others living in the city? "I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Conventional piety interpreted such disasters as a punishment for sin. Without disputing the equation, Jesus says that there is no real difference between the victims of these tragedies and his hearers: the wages of sin is death across the board. There is no way out, except repentance. Speculation about relative sinfulness among sinners is beside the point when all the speculators are themselves under a death sentence; when death is a heartbeat away from each of us.

Then Jesus tells a parable describing our situation, together with the way out. The owner of a vineyard has lost patience after three years with an unfruitful fig tree. "Cut it

down,” he says to his vinedresser. “Why should it use up the ground?” But the vinedresser pleads for one more year, together with a little digging and fertilizing. “And if it bears fruit then, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

In this parable, the fig tree is the sinner. The owner and the vinedresser represent the justice and the mercy of God as mediated by his Son. The fruitfulness looked for is repentance. Like the Galileans killed by Pilate, like the eighteen victims of the falling tower of Siloam, the fig tree has only so much time. Time is a priceless gift to us, the very gift of life for a space.

Since death is certain, and since Jesus himself would suffer and die under Pontius Pilate, what does he mean, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”? He cannot simply and flatly mean avoiding physical death, which he himself knew he would suffer. No, he means something else and radically worse. He means spiritual death.

In order to understand what spiritual death is, we need to understand what sin really is. Usually we think of sin as various transgressions: theft, false witness, murder, adultery; or even blasphemy and idolatry. But at its root sin is turning away from God, a death to God, in the mind, heart and will. The particular sins of transgressions are some of the results of this most basic sin of turning away from the source of our life.

Sin is a state of existence. One hesitates to call it life, even though a person may be busy and even physically healthy in such a state. It is the predicament into which we are born, which the Church names original or birth sin. When our first parents fell, we all together fell in and with them: in Adam all die. This aboriginal calamity is in evidence everywhere, in our genetics and environment, in nature and nurture. It is the subject of the world’s great literature, including dramas from Aeschylus to Sartre, the title of whose play, *No Exit*, defines the problem.

And it is the problem most urgently addressed by the Word of God in Holy Scripture, and above in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is the story of God’s repeated punishment of sin and then turning again in mercy (repenting) toward his creatures, and his people Israel in particular, calling them back to life. This turning towards us by God in the Old Testament is consummated in Christ: As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall be made alive! So God has turned, repented from punishment, most decisively, in love towards us. But it is of no avail, unless we meet this amazing grace with a turning of our own: repentance, which is not only a forsaking of sin but openness to life, a move from darkness into light. In the New Testament, repentance means transformation, a change of mind and heart essential to faith. When God’s move towards us is met by this response, then we have connected with God and escaped death. The snare is broken, and we are delivered. The fig tree has blossomed at last.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem to die our death. He who knew no sin was killed as a sinner, made sin, for us. He was crucified, dead, and buried. But on the third day God raised his Son from the grave, vindicated his life, and opened up the way of salvation. To repent, to undergo the responsive transformation and change to faith, is spiritual incorporation into Christ, eternal life with our risen, living Lord. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come!

Recall, however, that there is only so much time, and we do well not to take one day of it for granted.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.