



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 20, 2022
The Third Sunday in Lent

Solemn Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Luke 13:1-9
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Sacred to the memory...

How do we want to be remembered when we have long gone from this earth? Look at the Great Reredos, or the fabulous stained glass of this Church, or the images that look down on Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street, or the carved inscriptions around this church; Memorials of the great and the good, and perhaps some that struggled to be good in spite of their greatness. What kind of epitaph do we hope to have on our own gravestone, or what kind of eulogy do we hope to hear? I have not walked through enough cemeteries in the United States to know if this is true of them, but if you walk through many Victorian graveyards in the United Kingdom, you will often see one large word carved at the top of each headstone – *Sacred*. ‘*Sacred to the memory...*’ but it would only take a lapse of concentration on the part of the stone-mason for the letters ‘a’ and the ‘c’ to be accidentally juxtaposed that a hidden meaning would be revealed; not Sacred, but *Scared!*

In our Gospel reading today, we hear of an incident that clearly scared the people, for they tell Jesus about Pilate killing a group of Galileans and desecrating their ritual offerings. Now, we must remember that Jesus had grown up in Nazareth which is in Galilee; it is where his ministry began, so these people are not just telling Jesus about Jews being persecuted, they are telling him about his kinsfolk, possibly his friends or even his family, and this should not be lost on us. The people seem troubled by the fact that they died in a horrible way, as if the manner of their death had something to do with their sinfulness. Jesus responded by giving yet another example of a tragedy - the eighteen who were killed by a tower falling on them. Jesus makes it clear that the horror of those tragic events was not a consequence of sin. However, Jesus then says something that at first hearing sounds quite shocking; “*Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*”

Sacred or Scared? The word ‘repentance’ in Greek means ‘to turn around,’ quite literally, to make the body face the opposite direction. On this Third Sunday in Lent, the Lord calls you and me, as he called his first disciples, to repent – to turn around, to make a qualitative change to our lives, because we know where we are heading – to the day of our death and because we do not know the manner of that death. Jesus invites us to face up to how we live our lives and, ultimately, how we will be remembered. Sacred or Scared?

As Christians who believe in the Word made flesh, the greatest memorial that we can hope for is that our lives are so transfigured by the presence of God that our lives and our actions become the lasting memorial with no need of a stonemason's chisel. Lives where we are not scared of death or even the manner of our death. Of course, that is easier said than done, which brings us to the parable that Jesus tells in today's passage. The parable of the fig tree emphasizes the invitation of Jesus to repent. If you are an avid gardener, then you will know that it normally takes three years for fig trees to grow to maturity and begin fruiting; they

are very vigorous. In my last home, before coming to New York, I had planted a young fig tree in a very sunny spot at the bottom of the garden, against a fence. Within several years, it had completely taken over that part of the garden. Its leaves were huge and it was laden with fruit. But the fig tree of the parable is barren, so the owner of the vineyard is quite right to ask for it to be uprooted; it is, after all, draining the soil of energy. But the gardener has faith, and the gardener has patience; he wants to nurture the fig tree. *Not* uprooting it from the soil will, ironically, mean having to *enrich* the soil further with manure in order to fertilize it and encourage it to grow even more vigorously and it may need pruning. The gardener is shrewd; he knows that if nothing changes, then the fig tree will need to be removed and they will need to start again. Jesus is simply saying to his hearers, and to you and to me, that we need to have our roots in fertile soil; that we need to be nourished and cared for; that we need to change our lives (and that includes our attitudes) so that we can bear fruit.

How do we do that? On Ash Wednesday, we all were given an invitation: *“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.”* Next Sunday, we will be half-way through Lent. So, there is still plenty of time to participate in some of the devotions and the Lenten practices available in Saint Thomas Church in-person and on-line. They are provided not because the clergy like to even more busy for six weeks but because they help all of us reflect on our lives and where we are going. Can you give up an hour on Saturday to walk the Way of the Cross with us as if you were in Jerusalem with the Lord? Can you give up 25 minutes and attend one of the lunchtime masses? Can you spend just *five* minutes sitting still in the Chantry on a Wednesday afternoon praying for peace in Ukraine. Each Saturday, a priest sits in the Resurrection Chapel to hear confessions and give absolution, or to pray for healing, or to simply listen to someone's story. Sometimes, it is the loneliest 45 minutes of the week! At other times it a celebration of the lavishness of God's abundant love as someone puts into practice the Lord's invitation to repent. This reckless living of the Christian reflects God's own reckless involvement in his creation; to live a life dominated by selfless love.

My dear friends, Jesus has a stark question for each of us today and it is simply this: How do you want to be remembered after your own death?