

SERMON
March 7, 2010



Lent C

Fr. Ray Kasch, Rector
St. Patrick's Anglican Church, Smyrna, TN

Lessons – Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor 10:1-13; St. Luke 13:1-9

These last few weeks have been filled with news that seems to come straight out of the Revelation to John. As you know, right on the heels of the devastation in Haiti, an earthquake hit Chili that is said to have been 800 times stronger than the one that hit Haiti. Then as if that were not enough the earthquake caused a tsunami that added to the cataclysm. The aftershocks have been as strong as earthquakes in California that rock that part of the world. The President of Chili announced last week that it will take over four years to rebuild the areas that were most affected.

Let's put this in some real life perspective. Tennesseans freak out if we think that we will be snowed in for more than a day. What do we do? We rush out and buy up all of the available bread, milk and eggs, because evidently you are supposed to eat French toast when it snows. And all that panic is over a couple of inches of snow that is gone in a few days. Imagine if your whole town was laid to waste and then you were told to expect it to be that way for years to come. There have to be many people in Haiti and Chili today wondering where God is in all of this death and destruction. I know that one TV preacher tried to blame the earthquake in Haiti on their voodoo background but I haven't heard any theories about Chili as of yet.

In our Gospel lesson two devastating news events of their day were being discussed. One was a story of Pilate killing some people and mingling their blood with the offerings that they had brought to the Lord. This horrible act of Pilate certainly fits his profile. The Jewish historian Josephus tells of a time where Pilate heard of a Samaritan prophet gathering a large crowd in order to uncover sacred vessels that supposedly

had been buried by Moses. In response to this movement Pilate dispatched his army and had the crowd massacred.

The other news event under discussion was about a local tower falling over and killing 18 people. It puts us in mind of those huge cranes that seem to regularly fall over and crush a few people and since that kind of thing makes the news today, it would only be natural that it was a topic of conversation for the people around Jesus.

And much like the TV preacher who connected the earthquake in Haiti to the sin of voodoo, the mindset in Jesus' day was also to blame the victim. The thinking was that they must have done something to deserve either God's judgment or bad karma and that is why Pilate killed them and that is why the tower fell on them. They were looking to Jesus to corroborate this much like the time when the disciples found the man who had been blind from birth and asked Jesus, who sinned, him or his parents.

Jesus addressed this but not in the way that they expected. Instead He turned it back on them. "So you think that this happened to them because they were terrible sinners, well unless YOU repent YOU will die just like they did." It is so very important to clarify here that Jesus is not corroborating their blame-the-victim mentality. Rather He is using their perspective to turn it back on them. Why did he do this? Because people are very good looking down their noses on others and thinking that somehow they are superior. If we don't do this outright we at least take comfort in thinking that we are not as bad as others. Recall the Pharisee who came into the temple to pray and seeing a wretched sinner thanked God that he was not like that man. Meanwhile the sinner beat his breast and asked God for mercy and Jesus said it was the sinner's prayers that God heard.

I was visiting a friend a couple of weeks ago who he said a profound thing to me. He had asked me how we were doing as a parish and I told him that we were doing well, particularly for an Anglican Church in the wilderness. He said to me, "Well

the top 10% in Sodom and Gomorrah thought that they were doing well in comparison to the others also, but guess what, they died right along with the others." He was right. I responded to his question by comparing how we are doing with the other Anglican churches that I know. I should instead have responded based upon how well we are fulfilling God's will. Our mission statement is that Jesus would be loved worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth. And so it is irrelevant if we have a larger membership than St. Swithins in the Swamp or a larger budget than St. Minks and All Sables. The real question is if we are loving Him, worshipping Him and obeying Him more and more or less and less? That is the true measure of how we are doing as a parish. St. Paul said in his letter that we just read "So if you think that you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." Jesus and Paul are both warning their listeners about getting their comeuppance if they are not careful.

Still Jesus' quick response sounds harsh, especially to modern ears. But I would suggest to you that instead of being insensitive that Jesus is going to the heart of the matter and His lack of political correctness reveals how truly serious the situation is.

In one of my final conversations with Bishop Herlong, as he was trying to talk me out of leaving the Episcopal Church, I asked him point blank if he believed that the direction of TEC was placing people's souls in danger and he said "yes." I then asked him what he would have me do if people's souls are in danger and he replied "Have patience." It was the only time I have ever raised my voice to a Bishop and I confronted him for saying such a ridiculous thing. When things are as serious as what happens to people in eternity, it is not unwarranted to use strong and even confrontational language. That is what Jesus was doing when He was calling His listeners to repentance, because the stakes are just that high.

After Jesus turns the question of the crowd back on themselves, He points them to two important qualities about God that are also important and are very

relevant to us during this season of Lent. To do this He uses a parable.

Jesus tells a story of a man who is going to cut down an unfruitful tree but the servant intercedes and asks the owner for one more year and it is granted. Fig trees are supposed to bear fruit every year. It would not have been just for the owner to demand the tree to do what it could not do if it was the kind of tree that only bore fruit once a decade. But a fig tree should bear fruit annually and so it was more than fair to give it three more years. Jesus uses this parable to teach the people whom He has just called to repentance that #1. God is merciful and patient and #2. God's patience is not without limits. Those are truths about God that we should always keep in mind.

I take communion to a 95 year old woman named Dot who lives in Hermitage. At 95 you don't always remember what you have said to others, in fact at 58 you have that problem too. So every time I visit her, because she does not remember that she has told me it before, she tells me the same story of asking her husband if he believed that God has a sense of humor. To which he replied, "He must have, He made you didn't he?" Well a similar line could be said about God having patience. Do we believe God is patient? "We're still here aren't we?" A quick glance over human history or the history of the Church or even thinking about my own personal history, no one could ever call God unjust for not having a flood on a regular basis. Let's face it folks we are a mess. The world is a mess, the Church is a mess and I am a mess and yet He loves us anyway. One of His greatest gifts to us is that He does not treat us as we deserve. He is patient and He gives us time to repent, time to change, time to heal and maybe even, by His grace, do better the next time.

Point two is that God's patience is not without its limits. The Rolling Stones wrote a song "Time is on my side" and in many ways it is. For example it is wise when you are angry with someone to sit down and write a letter but then give it three days before you mail it. Most of the time you won't. When you go through

something traumatic like a divorce it is good to give yourself a year or more to heal before you make any serious relationship decisions. We don't see it so much in our youth worshipping culture today but certainly in biblical days age was a badge of honor. In many many areas of our lives, time is an ally. But Jesus tells us through this parable that when it comes to repentance, it is just the opposite. The longer we put off repentance the greater control a sin has over our lives and so in this case time is not our friend. If we think that we will repent later about a particular sin, we better know that later may never come. You could have a tower fall on you. St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians, "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For God says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, NOW is the time of God's favor, NOW is the day of salvation." If on the Day of Judgment you say to God, "I was GOING to repent" then God may well say, "I was GOING to send you to heaven."

It is noteworthy how Jesus ends the parable. He leaves the story open ended. The servant is going to dig around the tree and put manure on it and the owner was going to give it another year but we don't know how the story ended up. Was the tree spared because it bore fruit or did it go a third year without fruit and ended up being cut down? The story is left as open ended as our lives. Not one of us knows our future. I truly believe that God is sovereign and in control but I also believe that our choices are real and that those choices have consequences. What choices are we going to make? Will we make choices that bear fruit in our lives or will we receive God's grace in vain and fritter away what He has given to us? God will be patient and give us more time to turn some things around. He will send us servants to dig around in our lives and preachers like me to give us all of the manure we need but in the end it is up to us and the choices that we make as to whether we will be fruit bearers or not. The easiest thing to do in this life is to spend the precious little time that we have seeking treasures "where moths and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal."

Jesus challenge to them and to us is to "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" to bear the kind of fruit that lasts for eternity.

This season of Lent is a gift to us to stop looking at others sins and instead to take an inventory of our own and then to repent where it is called for. It is a time to focus on fruit-bearing. This Gospel lesson is confrontational. It portrays an in-your-face Jesus, but given that He will suffer on the cross and die because of His eternal love for us, who better to get in our faces? Let's commit to hear His word. Let's commit to love worship and obey Him to the ends of the earth. Amen.