

3rd Sunday in Lent

Year C

The Lord Of Compassion And Love.

We celebrate today the Lord who resolves to free us from our slavery to sin, if only we will listen to his serious warnings to us to repent.

(Readings: Exodus 3: 1-8, 13-15. I Am has sent me to you. 1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12. The life of the people under Moses in the desert was written down to be a lesson for us.

Luke 13: 1-9. Unless you repent you will all perish as they did.)

When most people think of sin they tend to think of such things as murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and all that sort of thing. Whilst these are, indeed, all sins, the list doesn't stop there. There is a tendency to ignore, or to forget the sins we call 'sins of omission', those things we ought to do but do not do.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the story of a fig tree that should have borne fruit but didn't. Despite being fertilised, and watered, and tended, it still failed to produce any crop. Giving the tree one last chance, the gardener decides to wait one more year, but if it still bears no fruit, he will cut it down.

Of course, the analogy here is obvious!

We are just like that fig tree. We are all like trees that God has planted, and fed, and nurtured with patient love and care. Like the gardener, God also expects us to bear fruit. But, unlike the gardener, he doesn't give us 'just one last chance', he gives us chance, after chance, after chance, to bear fruit. Even so, rather too few of us ever bear it in sufficient quantity, if at all.

The sin being described in this parable is, as I've alluded to, the sin of omission, for sin is not only something bad that we do, but also, something good that we fail to do. For example, remember the parable of the Good Samaritan; the story about a man who, whilst travelling from Jerusalem, down to Jericho, was beaten and robbed along the way.

Jesus told that story to point out a less obvious sin, the sin, indeed, the crime of indifference. Clearly, the men who attacked and stole from the traveller did wrong. But so did the priest and the Levite who, seeing the wounded man, passed him by, doing nothing to help him. Jesus tells us, again and again, that it is a sin to be indifferent to our neighbour's needs, not to care, or to act when we can.

It is a sin not to work when we can. And it is a sin not to give when we can. It is a sin not to pray when we can. And it is a sin not to help when we can. Such deliberately ignored opportunities, a kind of, "I can't be bothered" attitude is a sin. It is a sin of omission.

Suppose for a moment, that you saw a small child abandoned, lying in the middle of the road, crying. But on hearing its cries you were unmoved and decided not to get involved. And suppose, you chose to simply walk away. What great and terrible sin would you have committed?

How responsible, how guilty would you feel (and be) especially on hearing the next day that a child had been run over and killed in the middle of the road outside this church? Well, Jesus has something to say about that. He reminds us that if we make no effort to do good, in spite of all the opportunities we are given, then we shall have to pay a price.

In today's parable, he says, "If the tree bears no fruit, it will be cut down." We have all been given talents, and either we use what we have been given, or we lose it.

Let me give you another, less emotive, example. How many of you can remember all of your French lessons, or whatever language it was from school? If you learn a foreign language but never put it into practise you will, however interesting or useful it was at the time, eventually lose all the knowledge you once had acquired.

The same principle applies to human relationships. You don't have to do anything to destroy your relationship with, say, a close friend. All that that requires is for you to leave him or her alone. Don't keep in touch; don't answer your friend's letters; don't call him on the phone; never pay her a visit; don't bother sending a Christmas or birthday card.

A neglected, unexercised friendship will eventually die a sad, and oh so very easily avoided death. The next time you happen to meet that friend, you will find that you are talking to a stranger.

And the same can happen in marriage. More marriages die of neglect than are killed by impropriety, or even abuse. Two people who were once, very much in love, somehow end up being too busy, or too distracted, to exercise that love. Often, without even realising it, they start to let the little things go unsaid or undone. The whispered endearment, the caring touch of the hand, the loving look; small expressions of love are forgotten, and thoughtfulness becomes a thing of the past. Bit by bit, they drift, inexorably further apart, and if something is not done about it, their love will ultimately wither and die.

If we are to safeguard ourselves against the sin of omission, we must use the God-given talents and opportunities we have, for everyone can do something good in their lives, however small.

How long has it been since you did someone else a good turn?

When Jesus compares us with the 'unproductive' fig tree, he is urging us to become the productive, the 'fruitful', loving, caring people we can, and are called, to be. And when he talks about fruitful living, he doesn't mean big or grandiose things. Remember how he praised the worth of a mere cup of cold water, and the widow's two small coins.

We are all capable of those little, thoughtful deeds, deeds which make such a difference to other people, and which costs us so little. If we remember to do those little deeds, we shall bear fruit in our lives, the very fruit God, the 'Vine-Dresser', intends, expects, compels us to bear.