

Third Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 13:1-9

This past week I read about incidents in Washington, Indiana, and Kansas that involved multiple murders. That's just this past week; but if we were to research prior weeks, we would find such violence that seems to break out unexpectedly is a regular occurrence here in the United States. Gun sales across the country have been brisk, as Americans seek to defend themselves against their fellow citizens. The random violence phenomenon is so common that it came immediately to mind among several parishioners when we were talking after Mass Wednesday evening.

Horrific acts of brutality were common in Judea and Galilee two thousand years ago, the only difference being the perpetrator was most often the state. The incident described in the Gospel today comports with secular contemporary accounts of Pontius Pilate's behavior. Slaughtering Galileans in the midst of their worship was par for the course for him. He was so brutal that the brutal Roman government eventually had him removed from his post for cruelty. Just as we wonder who the next random shooter might be, so people in Jesus' day wondered if the Roman soldiers occupying their country were there to protect them or kill them.

In either case, whether the murderers are our neighbors or our governors, Jesus' answer to our expressions of fear is that we must repent. He responded to those who informed Him of Pilate's viciousness, "Do you think that those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." In other words, God did not appoint Pilate to murder those people in the midst of their worship service as a sign of divine judgment upon them. They weren't being punished by God because their wickedness was so much more egregious than the wickedness of their neighbors. Rather, their sudden deaths were a sign to us still living that we must be ready should death come calling suddenly.

It's important to note that these people died doing what they were supposed to be doing—offering sacrifices according to the prescription of the law. If God had orchestrated such violence, who could honor and love Him? The reward for doing what we're commanded to do by God is for God to have us killed by the sadistic governor? The concept is absurd. Similarly, the people killed in Kansas this past week were doing what they were supposed to be doing, working to provide for their families. In both cases people were killed while pursuing virtues, cut down while trying to do what is right. This is not a sign of God's caprice, but of man's sinfulness. We must be careful never to attribute to God those things that man is fully responsible for. To do so is really to deny God's love for us.

Because God loves us, He does not want us to perish. By "perish" Jesus does not just mean here that we will lose our earthly lives. This word "perish" encompasses more in its meaning than the lives we live here and now. Jesus is in fact concerned for our souls. The necessity of repentance is so that we don't go to hell, that upon our death we do not fall under judgment. God's love for us is such that He sent His Son to warn us of the consequences of sin, but in that warning is the promise of mercy for those who repent.

We must understand here that justice precedes mercy. Indeed, mercy presupposes justice. That is, sin is unjust because in our rebellion we fail to give God what is His due. Such injustice requires that there be judgment, that we suffer consequences for our failure to give God His due. Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we are all in justice hell-bound, excluded from eternity with God because of our lack of holiness.

This is where mercy comes in. Jesus calls us to repentance because God is not only just but also merciful to those who turn aside from their wickedness to embrace the life offered to them. Though we are unworthy of heaven, God forgives us of our sin by the blood of His Son, offered on the altar of the cross for the redemption of the world. Our repentance is our acceptance of this mercy. Our repentance is to say, "I know, Lord, that I am unworthy of heaven, but I am sorry for my sins and pray you will accept my repentance as a sign of my desire to be with you forever. I do not want to perish, but live."

Such genuine repentance leads us in faith to the Sacraments, where our sins are washed away and we are given grace to live as we ought. Indeed we are given the holiness, the state of grace we need, if we are to live with God in heaven forever. We will not perish if at the moment of our death we are in a state of grace. That is what was so beautiful about my grandmother's death a week-and-a-half ago: having repented of her sins and received the Sacraments of initiation, she died in a state of grace. God's mercy is such that He promises that such people will not fall under judgment when they pass from this life.

Our epistle from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reminds us that our repentance must be real. Using examples from the Old Testament, he notes that the people of Israel received the prefigurement of both the Sacrament of baptism and of Holy Communion, and yet thousands of them nonetheless perished. They passed on dry land through the waters of the Red Sea and ate the bread that fell from heaven. They drank the water that flowed from the Rock, from Jesus Himself, and still they perished. Because their interior disposition was so flawed, because their hearts were so corrupt, the ministrations of God Himself did not save them. They could have saved themselves, but God permits us in our freedom to turn away from sin or to turn away from Him. Those who turned away from Him were allowed to perish. God's desire to be merciful to us does not strip us of our freedom to reject mercy.

All this is to say that our preparations for death must include the Sacraments, which ensure we die in a state of grace. But what must also accompany the sure means of grace is the internal disposition that leads us to seek the Sacraments in the first place. We must truly mourn our sins and be free of all presumption, the lie that God's great mercy comes cheap and He'll dispense it regardless of what we do or don't do, whether we believe or don't. What we're talking about here is sincerity of heart, the apprehension that our sin truly offends God, but nevertheless we truly want to be forever with Him who is Love, so we will happily receive His mercy. As long as we're still here on earth, we still have time. During this season of Lent, please take the opportunity God is giving.