

"I tell you, No, but unless you repent you too will all perish." (Luke 13:3 & 5)

Two examples, two identical warnings. An interesting repetition for the sake of emphasis. Jesus uses some recent altercation between the Jews from Galilee and the Roman authorities which ended in a massacre, and another recent tragedy when a building collapsed in Siloam and killed several people, to explode the old theory arising from Old Testament teaching, that suffering and death are punishments for sin. He does not offer any explanation as to why such tragedies happen, but He does urge that disasters like these should serve as warnings to us to put ourselves right with God. We too might someday meet unexpected disaster.

The massacre can readily be understood - we see on T.V. that happening every day in Jerusalem in the clashes between Jews and Arabs. Only this time it is between the Jews and the Roman soldiers. It is pretty obvious that if someone deliberately goes out to defy armed authority he is likely to be hurt. Unfortunately there are always innocent people who get caught in the middle. To that we can only say: "Bad luck!"

It is much more difficult to understand the reason why, when, as in the illustration, a building collapses and kills bystanders. We had an unfortunate incident in this country a few years ago, when a child was killed by flying masonry as a hospital building was being demolished by explosives. No doubt the parents of that kiddy are still asking "Why?" And even if they are awarded lots of money in recompense, and if the men are proved to have been lacking in care and are gaoled, or fined, their question is still not answered.

Jesus said: "Do you think these people who suffered and died were worse sinners than all the rest?" Was that child selected to be hit by a brick from the explosion? She was hardly the great sinner the Old Testament preachers claimed would receive special retribution! Jesus did not offer an explanation, but by logic and reason and with an understanding of God's way and a knowledge that God is love, we cannot say "It is the will of God", and fold our hands meekly. Although some people often do in an attempt to come to terms with their grief.

It does seem a bit easy just to say "Bad luck, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time." Yet that does seem to be the only solution at times. At other times it may be as the result of human error - lack of judgement, inattention, carelessness.

Human independence has something to do with this. When God created this world, we believe that because He is perfect so His creation was originally perfect. In the creation of perfect human beings there had to be a real freedom for them, otherwise they would be merely robots. They had to be free to choose godliness: it could not be in-built, otherwise it would be worthless. And this implied the possibility that they might choose to reject godliness, or at least water it down, dilute it. Much, if not all of the desecration of the perfection of creation can be traced to the actions of human beings who have fallen away from perfection, indulging in greed, and selfish ambition.

Because we each have **this freedom, we are able not only to be** selfish and grasping, but we can also choose to be high-minded and generous, even able to move back towards godliness. We can also choose to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, just because we perhaps decide to walk down this street instead of that.

There is another factor, not so much to do with our decision to go here or there, but more to do with matters of behaviour and morality. That is the availability of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We make many

decisions throughout the day. Rarely do we pause to enquire of the Holy Spirit which way to go, and of course it is silly to think of asking about the majority of our decisions: shall I put vegemite or jam on my bread? Shall I cross the street here or down further? God surely expects us to make those kind of decisions; after us

all that is what He gave us minds for. But there are from time to time bigger issues which are not so easily solved so as to be a wise and proper decision. That is where we are wise to place it before the Holy Spirit. Not that we are likely to get the answer spelt out like an E-mail letter on a computer, or even as a voice in our minds. That can happen of course, but mostly the answer comes as a feeling of sureness, the right thing to do, the best course of action to follow. And the more we become accustomed to "tuning-in" to the Holy Spirit, the more clearly we will get the message. If we do not seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our decision making, we are bound to make serious mistakes, even if we do get some things right.

At the end of each of His two examples, Jesus said: "But unless you repent, you too will all perish." We should take that as a personal hint to get ourselves right with God, for repentance means turning around and going in the other direction, the right direction.

But Jesus was addressing a wider issue, also. He had premonitions of disaster heading for the People of Israel; He was able to interpret the signs of the times. As Messiah He had called Israel to reconsider how it had fallen from its vocation as the People of God, and to repent of the current national pride which had understood that vocation in terms of privilege and worldly greatness. To reject the Way of Jesus was to choose a path leading directly to conflict with Rome and subsequent catastrophe. In the mounting hostility to His own mission, in the strained relationships between Jews and Gentiles, in the frequent outbursts of patriotic, anti-Roman riots, and in the growing severity with which these outbursts were put down, Jesus read the signs of the times, which He believed should be apparent to all. As in the time of Isaiah God had used Assyria as the rod of His anger, so now He was about to use Rome as the agent of His judgement upon His disobedient people, and only immediate repentance could save them. They did not repent, and Jerusalem was destroyed in the year 70AD.

Those victims of tragedy, whether due to the vindictive severity of Pilate, or to an unforeseen accident, must not be regarded as outstanding sinners specially singled out for divine retribution, but they provide an analogy for Jesus to give a salutary warning that the whole nation was heading for disaster. Like the unfruitful fig tree which is given one last chance to respond to special treatment, Israel must use the respite God has given in His mercy, to bring about a national reformation, or find that there is a limit to the Divine forbearance.

We too must get the message. Yet again we are reminded by the whole theme of the Season of Lent: "Rend your heart, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He **is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**' (Joel 2:13)

AMEN

"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor.10:13)

Is Paul correct? Writing to the Christians at Corinth he makes the astonishing claim that no matter how much evil is all around us, no matter how severely we are tempted to do wrong, we have no right to say in our defence: "I can't help committing this sin". Paul insists that God always leaves a way out for us. Yet when they are faced with their besetting temptation, people often feel and say it is quite impossible to fight against that impulse to act wrongly in the situation. Before we disagree with Paul, and say that sometimes there is no way out, we must remember a couple of important aspects.

The first is the feeling of guilt. When do we feel a guilty conscience nagging us? Not merely when we have committed some sin, either by actual deed or by some omission of what we ought to have done, but also surely when we have an awareness that really we could have avoided falling for that temptation. We don't normally feel guilty if we have genuinely tried to do something and failed - it is when we know we have not really tried that our conscience needles us.

Secondly, although we sometimes can see no way of beating our temptation, that doesn't mean the way out is not there: it may be just around the corner. Temptations often defeat us, and we give in to them, when just a little more patience and a little more endurance is all that is needed, and the danger is past.

Another thing to remember before we say there are temptations we cannot possibly resist is this: have we ourselves made them so? There are many temptations which at first are easily fought against and overcome, which grow on us if we give in to them just a little, until eventually they become our masters and we can scarcely fight them at all. Alcoholics, on the water waggon for 'several years, and feeling secure, may give way to the temptation to have just one little one - and they are gone, right back to total alcoholism.

People say: "I cannot help myself" when the true thing to say really would be 'I am not prepared to seek help beyond my own resources' It is not fair to say 'God has not helped me.' The truth is that God does offer to help us, and provide a way of escape. It is simply that we are often not willing or ready to accept that help.

When a person reaches the stage of saying: "I cannot help myself", and really recognises that as the truth, then is the time and possibly the last opportunity, to turn to the only One who can help. Tragically, many have to reach rock bottom before they acknowledge that, and many are lost because they cannot or will not turn to God even in their extremity.

One of the best known phrases of psychological jargon is "inferiority complex". In sport, or human relationships; in attitude to life, you suffer from it if you feel that you are up against an opponent too strong for you, that you are beaten before you begin the battle. St. Paul wouldn't have known that term, but he did know the danger of losing heart in the battle of life and in the fight against temptation. He often wrote of how the Christian, in the strength and power of God, can win through. 'God is faithful, and He will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing He will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.'

At least some of our susceptibility to temptation lies in a sense of false security. God is always there, ready when we need Him - didn't Jesus promise that? The error lies in our taking Him for granted - of worshipping, but perhaps casually and occasionally; of using the form of words of the services, but without really applying the deep reality; of participating in the Sacraments, but letting them become mere ceremonies. If our worship and service to God is like that, shallow and superficial, it is not to be wondered at if our resistance to temptation is low and that we are unable and even unwilling to lean fully upon God.

That was what St. Paul was on about in the opening verses of today's Second Reading, that even though the Children of Israel were brought out of their slavery in Egypt through the cloud and the sea; were fed with the manna and their thirst quenched with water from the rock, they still slumped into a sense of false security. "Now these things," wrote Paul, "occurred as examples for us." Warnings that we too can slump into a sense of false security.

It is commonly thought that suffering is a punishment for sin, a divine retribution. People say: "I must have done something terribly wrong for this to have happened to me." Or in reverse, which implies the same belief, when good fortune has happened: "I must have done something really good!" This is just not so. The whole argument of the Book of Job is the problem of undeserved suffering, and like Job we might cry out "Why does God allow this to happen?"

Jesus Himself rejected that idea that calamities are penalties for wickedness. Earlier on in this same chapter 13 of St. Luke's Gospel, from which today's Reading comes, He instanced two local calamities. There had been a riot by Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem, and the Roman authorities put it down ruthlessly and with many casualties. And Jesus asked: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus?" And at about that time there was a building accident in a town called Siloam, nearby, and 18 people were killed, Again Jesus asked: "Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?" He was saying that there is no automatic balance and payment between sin and calamity in the life of an individual sinner. But He does warn His hearers that sin does cause disaster, and that people are in danger of disaster as long as they fail to repent and go on in their self-centred casual way.

It is not easy to explain or to understand the occurrence of disasters. It is easy enough to ask: "Why does God allow it?", but that is not very helpful. Sometimes when a natural disaster happens it is simply that - in that part of the world hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, do happen from time to time, and if you are there at the time, you will be caught up in them. Other disasters are caused by people misusing the freedom of choice and expression with which God has created mankind. If a man chooses to take a gun and fire at random and kill innocent bystanders, it is tragic, but is the result of the misuse of man's endowment. Disaster is not necessarily the result of sin, but sin does cause disaster.

The final passage in today's Gospel is one of passionate regret uttered by our Lord over His people's lack of response. have rejected Him, the Messiah, the Holy One of God, their Saviour. They have alienated themselves from Him until such time as they repent, and are ready to welcome Him as Messiah, able and willing to say "Blessed is the one who comes in the name Lord."

We have time to repent, to change the direction of our lives, if necessary. We dare not be complacent and we must watch that false sense of security. We are to be ready and willing to join in the cry, 'Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord.'

Amen

INTRODUCTION WHICH MAY BE OMITTED:

The 4th Sunday of Lent used to be commemorated as Mothering Sunday. There is nothing at all in the Readings appointed for the 4th Sunday in Lent referring to Mothering Sunday: not to Mother Church, not to the mother of our Lord, not to mothers in general or family life. The Epistle appointed for this Sunday in the Prayer Book of 1662 did refer to "Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all". and spoke of Christians being like the children of the free-born wife of Abraham rather than of the bond-woman. Even that is a bit abstract to base a Sunday theme on!

Mothering Sunday is not an official festival of the Church - it is simply one of those ancient traditions kept for centuries, encouraged by people who would rather have it than the commercialized American-born, secular Mothers' Day.

Today is also known as Refreshment Sunday, partly because when the family came home to celebrate Mothering Sunday, the strict discipline of Lent was relaxed as the family enjoyed their reunion. The 1662 Gospel for the day encouraged this, being the account of the miraculous feeding of the 5000. For people observing a rigorous Lenten diet, a break in the middle before going on to Passion Week and Holy Week is a good thing. But that is all historical tradition and nothing to do with today's theme, which is about forgiveness and the chance of a new beginning.

The **Parable of the Prodigal Son** is one of the great gains we have given to us with the introduction of the 3-Year Cycle of readings: this popular and familiar parable is not amongst those appointed in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer! Strange, but true.

A young man is restless and wants to leave home to spread his wings. He asks for his share of the family property. His father doesn't try to stop him, but divides the estate, giving the son his share. The son goes off to a far country, where he squanders his money in high living. "Dissolute living", according to the New Revised Standard Version. "Riotous living", the Authorized Version calls it. "Loose living", the Revised Standard Version says, and "Reckless living" according to the New English Bible! But you get the picture. There is no lack of friends to help him spend his money. But when he has run through it, his fair-weather friends melt away. There is a drought, famine sets in, there are no jobs, and the young man is in deep trouble. poverty and loneliness'. He is reduced to earning an existence by feeding pigs and sharing their food - a terrible humiliation for a Jew to whom pigs are unclean animals. Then he comes to his senses. He realizes his stupidity. He repents of his pride and folly, and decides to return home to beg his father to take him back, even as a mere hired hand: they at least had enough to eat. He rehearses what he will say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." So he returns home.

Like any parent, his father has been hoping and praying and longing for his son's return, and when he sees him in the distance, trudging unhappily home to face the music, he runs to meet him, to welcome him. The son blurts out his confession of unworthiness, but his father brushes it aside, and calls for the servants to bring out the best robe and put it on him; to put a ring on his finger, and shoes on his feet. The fatted calf must be

killed and there must be a joyful feast, to celebrate. "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

This parable of the Lost Son is one of a set of three, the other two being the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. They each speak of the same kind of joy - joy over a repentant sinner. "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (15:10) The chief message of all three parables is firstly the repentance, the return of a lost one; the next is the joy which repentance brings about, on earth and in heaven.

But that is not the end of the story. Those of us who worship regularly and faithfully; who endeavour to live according to the standards of Jesus; and who work and give to maintain the fabric and ministry of the local Church, may be faced with the possibility of being identified with the other character in the narrative. The elder brother, the one who tends to be overlooked even in the retelling of the story. The one who stayed at home, faithfully working the family property. It is entirely natural that he is put out and upset about the fuss being made of this young waster after the mess he's made of his life, and the way he's squandered the family's hard earned savings, or part of it. "For all these years have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who had devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

In the Church, and indeed in secular organisations, there are those who work and give unstintingly, bearing the heat and burden of the day, and often it seems that just when things are beginning to go right at last, someone who has not previously been involved comes in, in time for the good bits. In the Church the temptation to moan and complain about late starters should vanish as we keep before us what we are about - the encouragement of people to turn to God. When this is consciously our aim, then we can only be glad that we have been able to help keep the show going so that a newcomer, a late starter, can join in the worship; can turn to God; can repent.

It is great to know that our Heavenly Father would speak to us in the understanding, tender words of the father in the parable: "Son daughter - you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The Pharisees of our Lord's day were harsh and unforgiving in their attitudes to those whom they regarded as sinners, outcasts. Jesus was telling them that they must change their thinking about God who forgives the penitent sinner; they must change their attitude, and welcome back the lost and strayed. Not to be like that elder brother, unforgiving and resentful, unable to share the Father's joy that the lost has been found.

God is so loving that when we go from Him into a far country, He doesn't shrug us off and leave us to stew in our own deserved juice; to suffer our well-merited deserts. He goes on loving us, and longing for our return, always ready to forgive. His love is never passive - He goes out to meet us as we return, repentant, and His forgiveness is warm and generous. It is so much easier to return, as we come to our senses in that far country, knowing of the forgiving love of the Father waiting for us. Because we are not forced to return! The Holy Spirit works on us, urging us to come home, but unless we listen and act and repent there can be no welcome, no joy in heaven. "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

As we come to know our own need for repentance and forgiveness, so we will be the more able to forgive those who sin against us, which in turn enables our Father in heaven to forgive us in like manner. And joy, in heaven and on earth, will result.

AMEN

As we enter the final fortnight of Lent, it is good for us to be reminded of the people who were against Jesus. It could help our appreciation of the events of Holy Week and Good Friday, and it could even perhaps, suggest to us faults in ourselves, reminding us that we share in the burden of the guilt of the world. Again and again we are reminded by the events of the Gospel narrative that many of the people who came into contact with Jesus did not accept Him, or believe in Him. Their rejection of Him ultimately brought Him to death on the Cross. For those of us who can stand off and the whole life, teaching, and purpose of Jesus, it is not easy to understand the hostility and hatred for one who lived a life of such love and compassion and kindness and sympathy and service.

There was apathy, of course, probably in the bulk of His hearers. He was interesting, sensational at times, but it was a bit of a drag to do anything about it like changing their mode and habits. Much like most people today. The real anger and opposition centred in three groups of people: the scribes and the Pharisees, who together form one group; the Sadducees; and the priests.

To appreciate the outlook of the scribes and Pharisees, we must have some idea of the Law. In Judaism the word "Law" is used in three senses. First it is used of the Ten Commandments, the Law as given to Moses. Second, it is used of the Pentateuch or Five Scrolls, that is the first five books of the Old Testament, which make up the Law as contrasted with the teachings of the Prophets and the other Books of the Old Testament. Thirdly, it is applied to the oral or scribal Law, that body of interpretation developed and grown out of the other. It was last to come into being, but in the eyes of the scribes and the Pharisees it was the most important and binding of all, because it purported to explain how the Law applied in daily living. Here we come to the whole principle upon which the scribes and the Pharisees acted: if the Law is the complete Will of God, it must contain everything that is necessary for holy living. When we look at the Commandments we find a series of great principles, but few details. That was not good enough for the scribes and Pharisees; who desired a set of rules and regulations to govern every action and every situation which could possibly arise in life. And to be fair, our legal system today works in the same way, with lawyers and solicitors and judges interpreting laws laid down by Parliament. Today such laws can be altered and modified by another Act of Parliament - but you cannot change the Law of God, only try to apply it to a given situation. And so in their hands a comparatively few supreme moral principles were turned into an vast array of petty rules and regulations. This sifting and clarifying process still goes on today it seems. There is quite a difference between the nation of Israel, and **the Orthodox Jews**, who make up a significant proportion of the nation, and who are strongly legalistic. To them, pigs are unclean animals, and forbidden. So in Israel, pigs are bred and turned into pork chops for non-Jews, but they spend their whole existence in pigsties built on stumps, so that their forbidden cloven hoofs may never desecrate the sacred soil of Israel! A religious court, after some weeks of deliberation, said that it was not an offence for a Jewish male to pick his nose on the Sabbath! To keep the Laws was, and is, to serve God without offence.

Jesus clashed with these people on three main grounds. He was - not one of them - not a scribe or a professional rabbi, but a mere layman, a carpenter from a provincial village. To them He had no right to teach about God. The religious professionals of Jerusalem were determined to silence this outspoken layman with His revolutionary teachings. And then, from their point of view, Jesus was a constant breaker of the Sabbath Laws, as they followed Him and watched Him and accumulated evidence to show that He was a deliberate and blasphemous Sabbath-breaker. After all, He healed .on the Sabbath, quite openly and unashamedly and even defiantly!

Thirdly, Jesus' attitude to sinful men and women was to them shocking and incomprehensible. The Pharisees narrowed the love of God until it included only the righteous in their sight, the self-righteous. **Jesus widened the love of God until it reached out to all, saints and sinners alike.** Because the religion of the scribes and the Pharisees was a religion of legalism, they could not understand or appreciate a religion of love.

The second group of our Lord's opponents were the Sadducees. These people had beliefs which differed from the Pharisees, although they were also devout churchmen. They rejected the whole of the oral scribal Law, and accepted only what was written in Scripture, and the Five Books of Moses were to them the only authoritative part of Scripture. The Sadducees were the aristocrats of the Jews, and they dabbled in politics, collaborating with Rome because they were wealthy and had most to lose. They were against Jesus because they misread Him. They saw Him as a revolutionary, or at least saw His teaching as leading to revolution, which would bring down the wrath of Rome on all Jews. They were the ones who laid the charge that Jesus was making Himself a king. Pilate had to ask Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" The hatred of the Sadducees was based entirely on self-interest. In Jesus they saw a threat to their privileges - therefore Jesus must go. At least the Pharisees hated Jesus from religious motives, even if those motives were wrong. The Sadducees hated Him, from worldly and materialistic motives, and were prepared to do anything to obliterate this perilous and disturbing Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, the priests, and as we read the narrative of the Passion of Jesus on that last day, we see the terrible malignity of the priests. They were jealous of His welcome into Jerusalem. They bitterly resented His cleansing of the Temple, and demanded to know His authority for speaking and acting as He did. It was to them Judas went. They were behind His arrest. It was to the house of the Chief Priest that Jesus was taken for a mockery of a trial. They hired false witnesses. The High Priest was the main cross-examiner of Jesus. They delivered Him to Pilate and accused Him and urged the mob to choose Barabbas and mocked Him on the Cross and even urged Pilate to set a special watch on the tomb.

Again, fully to understand this hatred we have to see the place of the priest in Judaism. The only qualification was unbroken physical descent from Aaron, Moses' brother and mouthpiece. Moral qualification and spiritual power did not enter into it. The perquisites of the priests were enormous. Of all the sacrifices offered at the Temple, only the burnt offering was entirely consumed by the fire of the altar. In every other case only a small part of the victim was burnt, the rest going to the priest. Apart from the burnt offerings there was no offering of which the priests did not receive a substantial part. No class of people knew such luxury in food, for it was not just meat they received - it was flour and oil and wheat and honey and barley and figs and grapes and pomegranates and olives. The priests were a privileged body of men living a life of ease and luxury at the expense of the people in a country which was comparatively poor. As well, these men wielded spiritual power, for they stood between man and God, according to Judaism. It was abundantly clear that if Jesus was right, the priests were very wrong and even irrelevant to religion. To the priests, either Jesus had to go, or their vested interests in the sacrificial system were in jeopardy.

It was a tangle of human motives which hounded Jesus to the Cross. All the loveliness of His life mattered nothing. Jesus cut across blind and rigorous orthodoxy, political and social ambition, ritual and spiritual aristocracy - and so men came to the conclusion that He must die.

May we be enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to root out from our lives all those things which hamper us in our devotion and service to our Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

AMEN