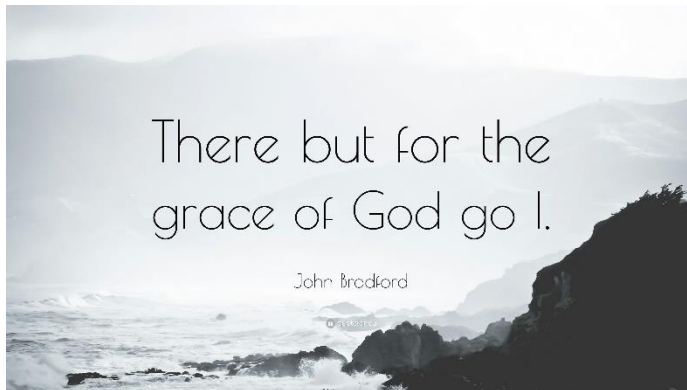


Third Sunday of Lent



kneel down and thank God for the gift of another day. That is why I subscribe to the daily newspaper.”

There was an old man who maintained his subscription to the daily newspaper even though he had virtually stopped reading. His neighbour asked him why he maintained a subscription to a newspaper he never read. This was his reply. “Every morning, before any other thing, I look up the obituary section of the newspaper to see if my name is there. If I don’t find my name there, I

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. (Luke 13:2-5).

In the face of a natural disaster or personal misfortune befalling other people, it is wrong to suppose that they must have done something to deserve it which those who are free from the disaster did not do. The right disposition is to realize that it could happen to anybody, and that if it does not happen to us at this time, it is because of God’s mercy and love and not because of what we deserve.

The Reverend John Bradford (1510-1555) was asked what he thought of the criminals who were being led to public execution, and his reply was: “But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford.”(who is said to have uttered it while witnessing criminals being led to execution, acknowledging that he too could have been in their situation but for God’s mercy). We can see the same attitude in our old man who reads the obituary column every day. He knows that but for the grace of God his name would be there on that page.

The attitude of “but for the grace of God, there go I” helps us make the best of the opportunity God gives us in prolonging our lives from day to day, from week to week, from year to year. We realize that, like the barren fig tree, the extra time has been given to us for a purpose, as a chance to bear fruit. The misfortunes of the less fortunate are not an occasion to stand in judgment over them but an invitation to humble repentance, knowing that “**unless you repent, you will all perish just as they**” (verse 5). Next time we hear about earthquakes and plane crashes in the news, let us realize that it could happen to anybody, and that if we have been spared such disasters it is so that we might repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance.

This parable of Jesus depicts the patience of God with us, but it also contains a warning that we should not presume upon it. God gives us time to get right with Him and to bear good fruit in our lives, but that time is now. We cannot assume that there is no hurry. A sudden life-threatening illness and unexpected death leaves us no time to settle our accounts when each of us must stand before the Lord on that day of judgment. Jesus warns us for our own good so we will be fruitful and ready at all times to give our account to the Lord. Tolerating sinful habits and excusing unrepentant sin has clear consequences for our lives. They not only lead to spiritual barrenness but spiritual death as well. The Lord in His mercy gives us grace and time to turn away from sin and from an attitude of worldliness that opposes God's will; but that time to turn away from sin is right now. If we delay, even for a day, we may discover that grace has passed us by and our time is up.

The fig-tree parable conveys the message that God is very patient with us. God is more than generous with the opportunities for us to reform our lives. There's a story of a man living in the hurricane-prone suburbs of Florida. He went to a department store downtown and bought a fine barometer. Delighted with his acquisition, he hurried home and proudly hung it in his living room wall. But what he saw made him very angry: The barometer reading indicated "Hurricane!"

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Convinced that he had been sold a defective instrument, he walked back to the department store, handed the barometer to the sales clerk, and snorted, "Hey, what's this barometer you sold me, ha? I put it up in my house and what do you suppose it registered? 'Hurricane!'" To which the sales clerk replied, "But what I sold you was brandnew?" "No, I don't like this instrument," he said angrily, "I want a replacement." "No problem," the store owner said. "I'll replace it in a minute."

The man headed for home with his new barometer, but by the time he arrived there, his house had been blown away!

This third Sunday of Lent, Jesus is asking us to take a good look at ourselves and avail of that chance to "fertilize our tree and to see how it can be more fruitful" before it's too late. Aware that death may come anytime, and that for some of us, it may truly be their last year, their last Lent to reform their ways and return to God, we are all challenged by Jesus to grow continually in faith by being a truly loving person (loving God and loving all those around us) and not merely "survive personally" as a Christian (by just staying out of sin and refraining from doing good).

But the parable also makes it quite clear that there is a ***final chance***. If we keep on refusing God's "chance after chance" offer, we will be surprised by the final visit of the "Land owner" in an unexpected moment in our lives – the moment to cut us down. Only today's Lenten spirit: – prayer, penance and charity – can save us from that.