

Lent III
3/20/2022

COMPASSION AND CRISIS

Today's gospel shares a sobering message. It speaks of calamities and hope. *Unless you repent.* Lent is all about repentance. At its root, repentance, no matter how forceful its message, is always about hope—Hope that things will change for the better. Hope and repentance always go together. If there is no hope, if we're all doomed no matter what, then there's no need to repent because it won't make any difference.

Unless you repent. To repent, to turn around from what is bad to what is good, is a matter of divine law. The first words Jesus speaks in St. Mark's Gospel are what we hear as we receive our ashes as Lent begins on Ash Wednesday: *Repent and believe in the gospel.* Some works of repentance are prayer, fasting and almsgiving but as important as these are, they are secondary to the disposition of the human heart. While repentance is a matter of divine law, how we live it out, for the most part, varies from person to person. Not only this gospel but Lent itself and in the end, the entire Christian life calls us to repentance, to ongoing conversion.

And then we turn to the parable of the fig tree. One scholar has described this as a parable of compassion and crisis. In terms of *compassion*, the gardener seeks to give this tree one more chance. After three years, a fig tree was supposed to bear fruit. The gardener pleads for mercy, for a tree. He will give it extra attention in hope that it will bear fruit.

In terms of *crisis*, this is a stark reminder that we don't have forever. God's mercy is always a call to deeper intimacy with him and not a matter of saying, *Well, whatever I can do whatever I want for as long as I want.* God's mercy is a plea to turn to him with our hearts. We're to be confident in God's mercy but never complacent. The fig tree could still lose it all and the same is true for us.

In Jesus the divine gardener who shows us mercy and cultivates us through his Church, through his word, through the sacraments, especially Reconciliation where, in an intimate and privileged way, we repent and where we receive and share in God's mercy. The gardener can show great mercy but the tree has to respond

Pope Francis notes, *We can have great trust in God's mercy but without abusing it. We must not justify spiritual laziness, but increase our commitment to respond promptly to this mercy with heartfelt sincerity.* In other words, God's mercy always calls us to deeper conversion, deeper repentance. The call to repentance doesn't contradict God's mercy, it expresses God's mercy.

There are two evils to avoid. One is the sin of presumption. It says, *No matter what I do, God will still love me.* Well, God will still love us but when we fall into that trap of presumption we cease to love God. The other is the sin of despair. It says, *I'm never going to make it. It's no use. Why should I even try?* St. Benedict taught, *Never despair of God's mercy.* We don't presume upon it but we never, no matter what, despair of it. Christians are called neither to presumption or despair but to have a great trust in God's mercy without abusing it, without falling into presumption or despair.

There's a long, beautiful prayer that at one point says to God, *Restrain me by your justice. Comfort by your mercy.* May God's justice keep us on the straight and narrow way of repentance and to do so more and more out of love rather than fear. May God's mercy save us from giving up. God's mercy always offers us hope to continue our journey to God. That journey to God that we make together as members of his body, as members of his church.

Why should it exhaust the soil? The barren fig tree takes without giving. It's not doing what it is supposed to do. It's ego-enclosed and self-referential. All this leads to a question to ask ourselves, *Do I exhaust the soil? Do I take more than I give? Do I give of myself at all?* Love has been described as goodness giving itself away. Abraham Lincoln once said, *Die when I may, I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow.* To repent, is to turn away from evil, to pluck a weed and to believe and do good is to plant a flower.

Unless you repent. Despite our barrenness, our selfishness, our sinfulness, Christ is the Divine Gardener who in great love seeks to bring forth fruit from the tree of our lives. God loves us not because we are good but because God is good. God

is love. God loves us. God desires our love. Here at the Eucharist, Jesus continues to give himself to us in love and we're called to do the same, to make a gift of ourselves to him. But people aren't trees. God shows us his mercy in Christ but we have to respond freely to the gift he offers. God's love for us calls forth love from us.

Compassion and crisis. God's mercy is a gift of divine compassion but a crisis is a time when one has to act. With lives of generous hearts and intentional faith, may we avoid the time of crisis and destruction by accepting the time of repentance, mercy and compassion and may that repentance, mercy and compassion bear good fruit in our lives and in our world