

**Bruton Parish Church**  
**March 7, 2010**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**The Reverend Charles A. Robinson**

**Blessed be the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer† Amen.**

**Lent is a time of reflection and repentance. Consequently, we confront the harshest and most difficult, even disturbing scriptures in the Gospels. Today's Gospel in Luke is such a text.**

**It seems to hit very hard. The answer that Jesus offers to those who present the story seems to portray a hardened and demanding Jesus who suggests a repent or perish norm.**

**The gospel reading begins with some who are present with Jesus sharing an account about some Galileans who apparently suffered at the hands of Pontius Pilate.**

**Luke does not offer any details and there is no independent historical account of this event, so we do not know the specifics of what has happened here.**

**We can speculate that some group of individuals was brutally massacred by Pilate's soldiers while in the process of offering their sacrifices – while at worship. This would have taken place in the temple and would have been horrific. Whether it was a recent event or something from the past, the account is offered to Jesus for his commentary.**

**It is very difficult for us to imagine this ever in our own land. However, the fact is this kind of brutality against persons of faith by officials of sanctioned governments has been perpetrated throughout history and does occur in our own time in nations around the world.**

**Perhaps those who brought this account to Jesus were hoping for an outraged reaction and perhaps they imagined that this would be the motivator to take up arms against the Roman oppressors.**

**However, Jesus' reaction is not one of outrage or even of very great concern for the slain Galileans. He calls for no confrontation with the perpetrators of the heinous act.**

**Instead, Jesus asks them whether they imagine that these Galileans suffered this horrible fate because they were worse sinners than other Galileans. He immediately answers his own question – “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”**

**Jesus then recounts another story about some others who died in a disaster when the tower of Siloam collapsed upon them. He asks, “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Again, he says – no, but unless you repent, you will perish just as they did.”**

That Jesus asks this question in such a way suggests that there were many around him that made direct correlation between disaster or suffering and sin – that when some misfortune befalls someone, it is because of something they did; that they deserve what they got.

Lest we look too harshly upon these ancient folks, we might pause to remember that there is no shortage of such thought in our own time. Inevitably, in the aftermath of such events as the recent disastrous earthquakes in Haiti, suggestions immediately arise from “religious leaders” that punishment is being exacted upon those who suffered and died because of a drift from morality and right living, or “deals made with the devil” – that God is displeased meting out cruel punishments.

Jesus’ reply and his subsequent parable suggest something entirely different.

While he does make a connection between lack of repentance and perishing, he does not reserve it for those who were devastated by an oppressive government or some natural or other disaster. He says to his audience that they too will be brought to ruin<sup>1</sup> without repentance.

Repentance is so much more than just breast-beating and remorse for failing to live up to standards of behavior. It is the word, **μετάνοια**<sup>2</sup>. It is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior -turning around in a new way.

Jesus is asserting that a new way of thinking is needed – not a way of considering which people are the most sinful, which are most deserving of ruin and punishment. Jesus says that all of those to whom he speaks – all of humanity indeed needs to evaluate where they are and where they should be.

To illustrate he offers the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard.

Because the tree is fruitless and has been for some time, the owner of the vineyard tells his gardener to cut it down so that it will quit wasting the soil. The gardener intercedes on

---

<sup>1</sup> **3134** ἀπόλλυμι fut. ἀπολέσω and ἀπολώ, mid. ἀπολοῦμαι; 1aor. ἀπώλεσα; 2aor. mid. ἀπωλόμην; second perfect ἀπόλωλα; (1) active *ruin, destroy*; (a) of persons *destroy, kill, bring to ruin* (MT 2.13); (b) with an impersonal object *destroy, bring to nothing* (1C 1.19); (c) of a reward *lose, be deprived of* (MT 10.42), opposite τηρέω (*maintain, keep*); (2) middle *be ruined, be destroyed* (second perfect active as middle); (a) of persons *die, perish, lose one’s life* (MT 8.25); (b) of things *be lost, be ruined* (MT 9.17); (c) of transitory things *pass away, cease to exist, perish* (1P 1.7)

<sup>2</sup> **18303** μετάνοια, ας, ἡ strictly *later knowledge, subsequent correction*; (1) religiously and morally, as a change of mind leading to change of behavior *repentance, conversion, turning about* (MT 3.8; 2C 7.10); (2) as a change of opinion in respect to one’s acts *regret, remorse* (a popular Greek usage not found in the NT)

behalf of the tree and seeks to tend it for some time to bring it back to fruition, before it is destroyed. The gardener, not the vineyard owner is the truly important figure in this story.

The gardener says, “Let it alone.” Not a great translation. The word that is used here literally means to forgive, release, or liberate the tree.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Jesus is saying that perishing is not caused by the sinfulness, or lack of fruitfulness of those who suffered at Pilate’s hands or from a disaster– that if that be the case all are deserving of the same destruction. In fact, the parable reveals that a fruitless tree can be saved by intercession and tending and nurturing - that fruit bearing is the intention for all trees.

Flannery O’Connor writes, in her story, “Revelation,” of Mrs. Ruby Turpin, a woman who has become comfortable with the good person that she knows herself to be. She is grateful to Jesus that he did not make her like so many of the other people that she encounters in her daily life. She sometimes wonders late at night as she lies in bed, which of the myriads of “other people” she would choose to be if Jesus had made her choose. Would she have chosen to be black or “white-trash,” fatter, or ugly or imbalanced? She cannot be sure, but she knows she must insist upon still being the good person that she is. She seems blissfully unaware that she has limited her world and has developed an air of superiority that displays disapproval to all about her that are different.

One day in a Doctor’s waiting room, her comfortable place is challenged by a young college woman who confronts her violently with her prejudice, throwing a textbook at her and calling her an old wart hog.

Her self-assurance shaken, she continues to reassure herself that she is a good person. Just because she is grateful that she is not black or white-trash or really fat or ugly, that does not mean she is a bad person. There is nothing really wrong with her. Still the words of the girl remain with her until one evening she experiences this vision --

“...At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the (pig) pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first times in their lives, and bands of blacks(s) (sic) in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like

---

<sup>3</sup> 4242 ἀφεσις, εως, ἥ (1) of captivity *release, liberation, deliverance* ([LU 4.18](#)); (2) of an obligation or debt *cancellation, pardon*; (3) predominately in relation to sins *forgiveness, cancellation of guilt* ([MT 26.28](#)); in the new covenant, ἀ. involves not a passing over of sins as in the old covenant (cf. *πάρεσις* [*passing over, overlooking*] in [RO 3.25](#)), but their *removal* from the mind of God, *taking away* ([HE 10.18](#); cf. [10.3](#))

frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”<sup>4</sup>

We all are the trees. We all should be bearing fruit. We all stand in need of repentance – to change our minds and to change our behaviors. We all need to be tended, nurtured, and interceded for in order to bear fruit. We all need to be tenders, nurturers, and intercessors of others when fruit bearing is lacking – not in judgment or superiority, but in love and with a knowing heart that very soon a fruitless day is right ahead for us in some area of our life. This, my friends, is the call to Gospel life. We are all the “other” and the bearing of one another’s burdens that we are called to, includes all of the others.

We are all one another!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

---

<sup>4</sup> Flannery O’Connor. *Flannery O’Connor: The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1971. 508-509.