

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019
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Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

You've seen the news. Terrible news these past couple of weeks.

The mass shooting in New Zealand a little over a week ago. A racist, a white supremacist, a gunman, a terrorist, walked into two mosques and killed at least 50 of the faithful – injuring at least as many more – while they were gathered for Friday prayers.

“Do you think that because these Muslims suffered in this way they were worse sinners than other people offering prayers and keeping the faith?”

Or those people – more than 500 at least, probably a whole lot more ... all those who died after the cyclone that struck Mozambique and Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa this past week.

“Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Africa, going about their business ... or worse offenders than those of us far away in North America, for that matter?”

If you find the very suggestion offensive, good. You should.

That's what makes this morning's gospel is as timely as the news of these past several days. And the rhetorical questions I've posed today are precisely the ones posed there.

The first thing I notice in this morning's gospel is that Jesus is the one asking these appalling, terrible questions. We're told that some people are telling Jesus that some Galileans were slaughtered while worshipping. As they made a sacrifice, Pilate made a sacrifice of them ... mixing human blood with that of the animals. There were some present who told Jesus about this horrific act of violence. But we're never told what they made of it ... or if they made anything of it at all.

Jesus is the one who raises the question. Were these Galileans were worse sinners than others?

And then Jesus goes on to another story from the day's local headlines, a story about the tragic deaths of eighteen killed when a tower fell on them. And Jesus goes immediately to ask the question of them. Were they worse offenders than anyone else from Jerusalem?

Most commentators suggest Jesus asks the questions because he senses that they're the unspoken, burning questions of the day. And maybe they were.

The thing is, I rather think that nobody in should suggest any blame lay with the faithful killed by Pilate while at worship. ¹

And who would blame those who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when the tower fell upon them? But Jesus asks the questions anyhow. Perhaps to bring to the surface the obscene suggestion that some have spoken out loud ... the teaching that God really does punish sinners for their sins.

It seems to me it would have been a minority opinion then, as it is in our own day. But it still gets said. I think of what some preachers said about AIDS and God's punishment. I recall how Pat Robertson has said that God allowed the terrorist attacks of 9/11 because of our nation's apostasy, that Hurricane Katrina was punishment for abortion, that God punished Haiti with a devastating earthquake because of a pact their forebears made with the devil.

So maybe Jesus asks these terrible questions because some really do speak such terrible things.

But I think Jesus may be asking these questions to bring to the surface the seeds we harbor in ourselves, even if none of us would ever say God wanted to kill Muslims at Friday prayers or directed a cyclone to punish offenders in Africa. We've heard people say, "I wonder what they did to deserve that?" We've likely played the tape in our head: I should have taken better care of my body. I should have watched what I ate. I should I have been a better friend.

We look for the cause and effect, because at some level we believe that's how the world works ... how God works in the world. Killing Galileans at worship and Muslims at prayer is the appalling conclusions we'd draw if we let them play all the way out.

So Jesus asks these questions so that he can respond both to what is said and what is held deep inside. And he says to us all, in clear and unequivocal terms, "NO! That's not how God works!"

(Now St. Paul, in our reading from 1 Corinthians this morning, seems to hold a contrary opinion. He seems to see a direct connection between the people's idolatry and immorality and God's punishment. I'm left to conclude that either a) Paul got it wrong or b) we're somehow missing the real point he's trying to make. But either way, I'm going to stick with Jesus on this one.)

It's almost ... a command: "STOP THAT WAY OF THINKING RIGHT NOW!" God isn't out to get those people we hear about in the news, the victims of violence and of natural disaster.

And the point holds for all of us, as well: God isn't out to get us either! "STOP THAT WAY OF THINKING RIGHT NOW!"

¹ Today is the anniversary of the assassination of Oscar Romero, gunned down on this date in 1980 as he celebrated Mass – his blood mixed with sacramental Body and Blood of Jesus. Surely nobody would say he was a worse sinner than others, that God intended to punish him.

Bad things – *terrible* things – happen to people, to folks from Galilee and from Jerusalem, to folks in New Zealand and in Africa. They're no better than us, no worse than us. Bad things – *terrible* things – happen to people essentially no different than us ... And nobody sees it coming.

And that's how I make sense of the next thing Jesus says: "Repent ..."

Repent means so much more than feeling bad ourselves and the bad things we've done. It means turning around, adopting a new mindset, a new way of looking at the world and living in it.

It's not enough to tell us to stop thinking a certain. Jesus tells us to find a new way of looking at God and the world and ourselves. And so, after telling us to stop thinking about the world as a place where God is waiting for people to mess up in order to punish them, Jesus tells us to find a new way of thinking about God, a new way of seeing the world and our place in it. Life is fragile. So repent!

Stop thinking that terrible things happen to other people. Admit that terrible things happen to everyone. Turn around and notice that we're all in this together.

I think about what Mr. Rogers used to say:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster," I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world. ⁱ

And I think about how the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, has responded to the shooting in Christchurch. She visited members of the Muslim community the day after the shooting dressed in black, wearing a Muslim-style headscarf. She tearfully told them that the whole country mourned with them. She broke down and hugged them. In her first address Parliament after the shooting, she began with an Islamic blessing: "*As-Salaam Alaikum*" ... Peace be upon you. She has in the past week repeatedly referred to the victims, refugees and migrants among them, as "New Zealanders." And she returned this past Friday – along with thousands of others – as the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast and followed by two minutes of silence. And she repeated the promise: "New Zealand mourns with you, we are one."

Life is fragile. We're in this together. ²

² In 1 Corinthians 10:13, St. Paul addresses us as "you." But "you" here is plural, not singular. He isn't saying that none of us, as individuals are never tested beyond our capacity to endure. He's saying that we, as a community have what it takes to endure and to support one another ... that God will provide US "the way out so that [WE] may be able to endure it." But only together, not on our own.

We need each other. So repent!

And life is a precious gift, as well. So repent!

You know, the one difference – the only difference between us and those who have died in such horrible ways – is that we are still alive ... which is the stark truth that makes Jesus' call to repent a gift, not a burden. Turn around and notice the life we've been given. Life is short and precious. Do the one thing that those who have died before us cannot do: repent, that you might live.

As that little parable Jesus tells reminds us, we've been given this time – a proverbial year of God's time – to begin again to be the people we were made to be, to live as God would have us live.

Brian Wren, an English poet and writer of hymns, invites us to look again at the precious gift of a life that has been given us, of this flesh that we are:

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,
growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

ⁱ Fred Rogers quoted @ <https://www.thoughtco.com/look-for-the-helpers-3299334>.