

Third Sunday of Lent C/2016

The readings of this third Sunday of Lent talk about the abundance of God's mercy and the necessity of repentance. They invite us to appreciate God's mercy and to repent of our sins.

The first reading describes the commission of Moses by God in order to liberate the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It shows that at that time, as Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, he saw a burning bush that was not consumed. It equally shows that when he approached close to it, God called him from the bush and gave him the mission to lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt. The text finishes with the revelation of the name of God as the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is sensitive to the suffering and pain of the oppressed people. There is also the idea that God cares for the wellbeing of his people. The last idea is related to the truth that in order to fulfill his designs God uses human beings as his instruments.

This text allows us understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus invites us to repentance. First of all, the gospel starts with a story that was told Jesus about some Galileans that Pilate murdered while they were sacrificing. Then, it talks about the reaction of Jesus saying that those murdered were not greater sinners than all the Galileans.

After that, the Gospel gives Jesus' argument by referring to the accident of the Tower of Siloam where eighteen people lost their lives. As it was in the first case, the Gospel reiterates Jesus' invitation to repentance.

The Gospel ends with the parable of the fig tree. It tells in particular the story of a man who planned to destroy his tree that did not give fruits, but renounced his project thanks to the intervention of his gardener.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today I want to talk to you about the value of God's patience and mercy, and the need for conversion and repentance.

I believe that the best way I can introduce this subject is to tell you a history. This story has been told to me by the person who lived it and I want to share it with you. In fact, in 1999, I met in Mississauga, Canada, a young priest who was newly ordained.

Before becoming a priest, he was working in a department store and was living with his girl friend in a condominium he had in the city. One evening as he was out to enjoy himself, he was involved in a severe car accident. By miracle he survived and he was transported to the hospital where he remained in a coma for more than a week. When he woke up, he did not remember what happened to him and listened to the stories told him by the witnesses and the family.

The fact of having survived death challenged him deeply. He understood that if God has spared his life, he wanted him to repent of his sins and to dedicate the remainder of his life to something bigger than what he was doing up to now. So, he left everything behind him and decided to become a priest.

Why do I tell you this story? I tell you this story in order to help you understand the stakes of today's Gospel. In fact, in today's Gospel, Jesus states that the Galileans killed by Pilate were not the greatest of sinners among their compatriots. Neither were the eighteen people on which the tower of Siloam fell, the worst of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jesus adds also a warning, namely that if his listeners do not repent, they will perish in the same way.

In that perspective, what Jesus wants to say is to remind us that if bad things happen to others and not to us, it is not because we are saints or the best of all, but rather because God is merciful and patient with us.

In truth, God gives us a second chance so that we might do better than we have done up to now. He gives us extra time so that we might change like the owner of the fig tree who delayed cutting down the tree in hope that it might bear fruit in the future.

That is how God is dealing with us; he is patient and merciful with us. He gives us extra time so that we change and do better. The best way to understand the gravity of these words of Jesus is to look at our background and past. If we are sincere with ourselves, we can just say: "Thank you Jesus, because you give me a second chance". Then, we can confess in the sincerity of heart the truth of the Psalm 130 when it says, if the Lord could count our sins, nobody would survive (Ps. 130: 3-4).

The consequence to draw from such a vision is clear: instead of being complacent, we have to appreciate God's patience toward us, because after all we are not the best of men, but rather pardoned sinners. What a sinner has to do is not to boast about his merits, but to repent of his sins. But what wonderful time to do it than during Lent! That is why in the life of the Church, Lent is a time of grace for the conversion of heart. But, the challenge is always there: will we listen to this appeal of God? Will we do something? Or will we let this time pass again without taking action as we have done up to now?

Moreover, if it is true that God is patient and merciful with us, then, we should not laugh at those who are in suffering or pain as though they are struck by God because of their sins. We should not look at those who have misfortune in their life as sinful people. On the contrary, we have to be humble and grateful to God for his patience and mercy with us, but at the same time make amend for our sins.

If we live this Lenten season with this profound spirit, it will be profitable to us. Let us, then, take advantage of this wonderful time of conversion and cleanse our lives through the sacrament of confession. Let us ask the Lord the courage of taking the present second chance seriously and reconcile with him and with our brothers and sisters. May God bless you all!

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12; Luke 13: 1-9



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Contact: www.mbala.org

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