

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday March 7, 2010

Lent 3C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus encounters some people who are trying to make sense out of the world. Aren't we all! Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem when some people tell him of some Galileans who were slaughtered on Herod's orders as they were in the Temple offering their sacrifices of atonement for their sins. This would put fear into the hearts of any pious Jew. Here they were doing absolutely everything right at the holiest place on earth. How can this be explained? Jesus knows what they are thinking – "Do you think they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?"

Jesus doesn't focus on the victims or on the wickedness of Herod. Jesus focuses instead on the people before him, on the people who just brought them the news. He now refers to an incident that has no moral agency, no wicked Herod, but instead a mere construction accident. Jesus asks them whether the 18 people killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed on top of them were worse sinners than everyone else living in Jerusalem?

Jesus is challenging a widespread belief, enshrined in many parts of the Hebrew Scriptures but roundly denounced in Job, that God punishes sin in a material way in this life. It is based on the logic that if God is responsible for everything that happens, and God is a just God, then calamities and other bad things must be the result of human sinfulness. The fallacy in this logic is that God is the immediate cause of all events and there is no room for human freedom and freedom in creation. Plenty of TV evangelists preach this and many people believe it. When I was a hospital chaplain, I saw many people prefer to blame their illnesses on their

personal failings and sins rather than accept the fact that we live in a fallible and unpredictable world.

But refuting the belief that God is not responsible for bad things happening to people is not Jesus' point. He continues on with "No, I tell you. But unless you repent you will perish just as they did." The emphasis is on the need to repent in view of the very unpredictability and seeming capriciousness of life. It is a good Lenten lesson for us as we are midway through Lent. Repentance is not about beating ourselves up, but is about turning. It is about turning towards the will of God for a good life for all and letting go of things and ideas that point us in other directions.

The point is that we are given freedom by God and thus are to be held accountable. We are to live in harmony with God at all times because we never know when the moment of accountability will occur. No the Galileans in the Temple and the people under the tower were not being punished by God, but they nevertheless never expected to be held accountable at that moment.

Judgment is a harsh term and is out of fashion with many people. But the truth is that if we have freedom to make decisions, we are accountable for the decisions we make. This is not a message of a wrathful God but the message of a God who desires our co-operation.

God desires to work in and through us. This is, I think, the point of the story we heard from Genesis about God's calling of Moses. God was responding to the cries of God's people, but God was doing it through human action. Moses was at peace, minding his own business and his father-in-law's ship, at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He was probably enjoying his good luck after having fled from Pharaoh after having murdered one of Pharaoh's soldiers. But God had other plans. "Go back and bring your people into the peace and freedom you are now enjoying," is a way of restating God's request of Moses. Moses was overwhelmed by this experience and hid his face from God. But he was not so overwhelmed to say, "Who am I that I should go

to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt.” This was the first of five times that Moses said in effect to God, “Boy, do you have the wrong guy for this job.” But God would have none of it. God promises Moses “I shall be with you.”

Jesus also tempers God’s judgment and our accountability with a message of God’s grace. He tells the parable of the gardener and the fig tree. I have read a bunch of commentators writing on this parable and they all have different takes on it. That is the purpose of parables – to get us to think and to bring ourselves to the story. But all of them, one way or another, recognize the story as telling us of God’s grace. God really, really wants us to succeed. Yes, God expects us to be productive with all we have, but God will go out of the way to give us what we need. Even when we appear to be hopeless failures, God listens the faithful gardener’s promise to nurture us more and gives us more time to succeed.

I think this is a hopeful message for us on this third Sunday in Lent. If you are like me, Paul and the rest of humanity you don’t always do what you intended to do and sometimes do the very things you intended not to do. But God is with us and God is patient. We simply have to repent and turn to doing what God wants us to do.

That is true in our own individual lives and relationships. But it is also true in our common life. The poverty, injustices, violence and discrimination that exist in our communities and in the world don’t “just happen”. I think our failings that fall under the “things left undone” category probably relate far more to these social sins than to our own personal failings.

So on this halfway point through Lent, perhaps we might want to extend our Lenten self-examinations to what we have or have not done about these huge failings that exist in the world. Before we say, “Boy, have you got the wrong person for this job”, let us remember God’s words: “I will be with you; and this shall be a sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

So what’s stopping us? AMEN.