

3rd Sunday of Lent = C
Exodus 3 :1-8a, 13- 15;
I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12;
Luke 13:1-9
Little Flower - 3/20/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

In the first part of today's Gospel, Jesus talks about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices and the eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them. He asked his listeners if they thought these people were greater sinners or more guilty than others. Jesus' answer to his own question was that they were not.

For several weeks, I have been thinking about the issue posed in today's Gospel. Probably most of us as children, at least those of us who are older, remember being told that if we did wrong, if we sinned, God would punish us. Does it really make any sense to say that God punishes us? Does it really make any sense to say that God punishes us for our sins in this life?

Certainly as children, most of us had a fundamentalist attitude about God's punishments. In other words, if we did something bad, God was going to directly intervene in our lives to punish us. However, as we got older, we realized that this was not true. God is not a punishing God who is waiting to catch us doing something wrong so he can punish us. However, when we say that God will punish us, we are saying that actions have consequences both in this life and in the next life. In other words, because God knows what is best for us, when we sin, bad consequences will possibly, likely, or inevitably occur in this life.

Although we do not talk too much about sin and evil these days, sin and evil are very real and very visible right now in our troubled world. The invasion of Ukraine was evil. Even worse has been the indiscriminate bombing or shelling of hospitals, especially maternity hospitals, shelters, and apartment buildings. If we have ever doubted the existence of sin and evil, we should have no further doubts. We look at the gun violence and homicides in the city of Indianapolis. These too are sinful and evil. So again, if we have ever doubted the existence of sin and evil, we should have no further doubts.

As an aside, it seems to me that one of the leading causes for the problems in our society is the drop in church membership and attendance, Catholic and non-Catholic, in the United States. The teachings of Jesus proclaimed and lived in an authentic Christian church community creates, sustains, and develops a consensus of values among its members, something that is certainly lacking in our society.

How can we live in a world such as ours? In today's first reading, when Moses asked God what his name was, God responded, "*I am who am.*" In a small book entitled *The Problem of God*, Father John Courtney Murray suggested that there are three possible ways to understand God's name. In his judgment, the correct understanding of God's name is the relational understanding: "I shall be there with you." In other words, God is the One who is ever present to his people. In fact, twice in this reading, God refers to himself as the God of their fathers, "*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.*"

This relational understanding of God also frames Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's Gospel begins and ends with the promise of God's presence. At the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." [1:23]. In the middle of the Gospel, Jesus says, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" [18:20]. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus promises to be with us all days to the end of the world [28:20].

My brothers and sisters, just as God was with the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land, Jesus is always with us on our journey of life. His love for us is infinite and everlasting. The parable of the fig tree at the end of today's Gospel powerfully reminds us that no matter what we do, our God is the God of second chances.