

Some things do not change, even as the centuries roll by. We meet such questions in today's Gospel—age-old questions; ideas that haunt our minds to this day. These are the questions about tragedy, about suffering and sorrow, about loss and disaster. Such sad events are nothing new; and the questions they bring are just as old.

The past few weeks have brought these questions to the fore again. The disasters have been piling up once again; the toll on human life has been great, the suffering real. Major earthquakes in Haiti and Chile get our wheels turning again. Why should man perish as the earth quivers and shakes underneath him? Why do these strike some, and not others? Where is God in any of this? Such tragedies put the bigger questions on the table again. Here are the big questions of life and its meaning, of life and its end, of where we are and why we are here. These questions were around in Jesus' day. Let us hear what Jesus has to say about this.

The news that got people talking then was the Galileans killed by Pilate. He had mixed their blood with their sacrifices; that is, they were in the temple worshipping the Lord when Pilate killed them. Imagine that injustice! It would be like the governor walking into our church today and killing some of this congregation. That would make some headlines! So also in Jesus' day, these Galileans and their death caught people's attention.

What of them? Jesus asks. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" We might reach the same conclusion today: those who suffer tragedy must have brought it on themselves; those who are killed must have some dark secret in their past, some sin that is receiving its due reward now. It is an attractive thought; for it gives us one explanation to cling to about why these people suffered while others were spared. But, as attractive as it might be, Jesus says that it is not true.

“No, I tell you,” Jesus continues, “but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Those Galileans were not greater sinners. Their deaths could not be pinned on some great sin that they were guilty of. Jesus’ answer is far different.

To drive the point home, Jesus brings up another case. “Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them; do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?” A tower collapsed; it killed 18 people. Another tragedy; another set of questions. Why those 18? Did the tower crush the 18 worst sinners in Jerusalem, the bottom of the pile? Jesus says, “NO. I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Jesus does not allow our simple scales of justice to explain such disasters—whether perpetrated by men like Pilate or by accidents, like the tower collapsing. Those who die did not have the greater weight of sin hanging in their balance; those who survive don’t have a lesser weight of sin, or a greater weight of good. Why these people? Jesus doesn’t answer the question. He points to something far more important.

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” He repeats it twice to drive it home. Disasters are a call to repentance. They call us to turn from sin to the living God. They call us to cut out all sin from our lives and leave it behind. They stand as a warning against all sin, not an indictment of the terrible sins of those who perish in them.

This calls for a view of life and the world far different than what we are used to, far different from how the world sees life. This calls us to see the world through the eyes of the Lord. Think of how man is inclined to view the world: a place where all should live, free from sorrow, free from tragedy. Peace and prosperity, we assume, ought to be the norm. Here is a place where every man should prosper, where all should enjoy ease and comfort. When someone suffers, we see it as something terribly wrong; something amiss, out of whack, unjust.

What this view of the world forgets is sin. Man sees the world as if the fall never occurred. Man longs for what he was made to be: a perfect creature living in a perfect world. God's child, enjoying the comfort and ease provided by God in the garden; eating from the trees God provided to give food; free from sorrow, free from loss. Man's longing for this paradise leads us to see this world in that light: a place where all should be right, and man should live in peace.

Of course, sin has changed that. Sin infects this world in which we live. Sin corrupted the perfection of Adam and Eve; sin weakened their natures, bringing them from the heights of perfection to the depths of sorrow and death. Sin brought suffering to them, death to them—and their children. And sin has corrupted our world. The ground produces thorns and thistles. Creation now thrashes about in storms, in wind and wave; it rages in fire, shakes and trembles in earthquakes; it is a place of danger, a place that can bring death in an instant. This is sin, working havoc on the world; the corruption of sin ruining the perfect creation, changing it from a place of peace and comfort to a place of danger and sorrow. That's how God sees our world; that's how it really is: God's good creation, corrupted by sin.

Seeing the world through God's eyes helps us to understand disasters in a new light. Seeing that this world, and especially man who dwells in it, is corrupted by sin, teaches us what is just and fair and right for man. What does man justly deserve? Only death and condemnation. Jesus' words point this out to us. Tragedies remind us that all men deserve death, not just those who perish in disaster. Tragedies bring home the ugly reality of sin in our world; Jesus bids us to see them as a call to repent—a reminder to put sin out of our lives, to turn to the only one who can deliver us from sin and its ugly wages, lest we also perish.

What is unfair, as we count fairness, is that those who sin should not have their wrongdoings counted against them. Think of the older brother of the prodigal son. He got mad when his father welcomed home his worthless, no good brother. Why should he get a party? Look at the fortune he lost! He ran away, spitting in your face, dad; now you welcome him back, with no punishment! How can this be? But let us be careful; were this same rule to be turned around and applied to us, how would we measure up? Jesus tells us: we are just as guilty as they. Our sins call for condemnation just as much as anyone else's sins.

For these reasons, tragedies call us to repent; they drive home sin and its consequences. On our own, we have earned only death here and eternally. We are spared only because of God's patience and mercy. Tragedies call us to watch and pray. They are a stark reminder that this creation is passing away, dying from its infection of sin. One day the Lord will bring it to its end; watch and pray, that the Last Day not catch you sleeping, unprepared for Christ's return. And tragedies call us to mercy; to help where we can; to set right those wrongs that we can—to help undo the damages sin brings into the temporal lives of our fellow man.

Yes, mercy—love in action; love that sees suffering and sorrow and moves to alleviate it where we can. Mercy—love that recognizes God's love for all, especially those who suffer; love that reaches out to bring comfort to the afflicted, to support our fellow man as together we endure the wrongs brought into our world by sin. Mercy; love that seeks to provide for man's physical needs, love that seeks to proclaim Christ to man as the ultimate answer; the one who rescues us from death. God calls us to have such mercy, especially on those who suffer. God has such mercy on us, sinful children of man.

We see that mercy in the parable of the fig tree. There the tree grew, in the middle of the vineyard. This was precious land; land tilled and cultivated to bear fruit. Land prepared to yield

a rich harvest. But this fig tree was wasting the land. It produced nothing. It filled up valuable space without yielding a single fruit. The owner wants the tree cut down—why should it use up the ground? For three years, for three seasons, it had borne no fruit. But the gardener pleads for patience and time. Leave it one more year—give it more time. I'll trim and prune it; I'll feed it—perhaps then it will produce fruit. And note the food given to the fig tree—manure spread around it.

So also Christ for us. He pleads on our behalf! He pleads for patience and time; He pleads for the opportunity to care for us, to prune and feed us; in His mercy He reaches out to give us time for repentance, time to turn from our sin to produce fruit keeping with repentance. Our Lord does not strike us down immediately, bringing the judgment for our sins upon us at once. He is patient and kind, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. And so He patiently tends us, in mercy leading us to repent and live.

And, as the gardener feeds the tree, so also Christ feeds us, at times, with manure. That is, we are called to repent and bear the fruits of repentance through the manure of suffering in this world. Such sorrow will often snap us out of a spiritual slumber; it reminds us that the most important things center on sin and forgiveness; center on what our Lord seeks to work in our life. God often uses these sorrows, these tragedies, to call us to repentance, to return to our Lord and His promise of full life in His Son, Christ Jesus. All those things we find unjust, unfair; all the suffering we meet in our lives or in other's lives—God uses these too to draw us to Himself.

This ought not surprise us; consider what God has done with the greatest injustice. Think again of the innocent man, given a sham of a trial, mocked and cursed, lied about and despised; the man condemned to death on the flimsiest of excuses, the man caught up in political games and condemned out of expediency for the governor. Think of this man, suffering cruel and

unusual punishment, though innocent of that crime—innocent of any crime! See Him suffer all this without complaint, without opening His mouth. See Him bow His head to the injustice, and die on the cross. From this death; from Jesus' suffering and death, God has brought about the greatest good. By this act of injustice, God has restored righteousness to man through faith in Christ. By this act, God has opened the way to return to paradise; given us a way to a world freed from sin and sorrow, a world no longer gripped by fear or shaken by tragedies.

Here is God's answer to the big questions; Here is His way from the life of sorrow and heartache in this world to the life of perfect justice and peace in the next. Here is Christ, with His cross lifted up above this world; Here is Christ, offering life and hope and peace to His children. Here is Christ, reaching out in mercy to rescue man from sin, to deliver us from its sorrow and heartache. Here is Christ crucified: walk with Him during these days as we make our way to the cross. Walk with Him to that great injustice that brings life and peace and righteousness to us. Amen.