

### *3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, C*

Today is the third Sunday of Lent, which means we are more than two weeks deep into that season of the year dedicated to penitence. Ordinarily, our idea of repentance concerns those things we will give up, those wrong deeds that we will stop to commit. And that, of course, is legitimate thinking. There are things in our lives that should not be. We need to confess them, accept God's forgiveness for them, and turn our backs upon them.

Giving up that which is wrong is a real part of repentance, but it is only part. It is not the whole story, as we would sometimes try to make it.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus talked about the other part. Twice he specifically warned his nation that they must repent or perish. Then to clarify his meaning, he told a story about a fig tree that was growing in a vineyard. For three years that tree failed to produce any fruit. The owner of the vineyard was seriously considering cutting it down. But a decision was made to wait one more year, during which the tree would receive special care and attention. Then, if at the end of the year there was still no fruit, the tree would be cut down.

Now remember the sequence of the passage. First, Jesus called upon Israel to repent. Then he told this story to illustrate what kind of repentance he had in mind. Israel was like that fig tree. They were growing in God's vineyard. They had been cultivated and cared for, but year after year they had failed to produce any fruit. They had failed to fulfill the very purpose for their existence. So Jesus was calling his people to repent of their uselessness. His challenge was not so much that they should stop doing that which is wrong as that they should start doing that which is right. That is positive kind of repentance and one that we too often overlook.

This reading reminds us that we need to enlarge and deepen our understanding of sin. To most of us, that word suggests the doing of something that should not be

done; and that is a true definition. But it doesn't go far enough. Sin is also the failure to do that which should be done.

The purpose of a fig tree is to produce figs. So, if there were such a thing as moral responsibility in the plants world, the failure of that tree to fulfill that purpose would be sin. Even so, you and I are in this world for a reason. We have been placed here to produce some positive good. When we fail to do that we are guilty of sin just as surely as if we had committed some evil deed.

I come across a little poem. The name of it is "Guilty", and here is what it says:

"I never cut my neighbor's throat;  
My neighbor's purse I never stole.  
I never spoiled his house or land,  
But God have mercy on my soul,  
For I am haunted night and day  
By all the deeds I have not done,  
That unattempted loveliness,  
The costly valor never won."

There is a verse in the book of James which says, "When a man knows to do good and fails to do it, for him that is sin." Jesus said essentially the same thing in his parable of the judgment. The people that day were called into account for failing to feed the hungry, comfort the sick, or visit the lonely.

Where did we ever get our narrow and negative concept of sin? The fig tree in our reading was not producing bad fruit. Neither was it infested with parasites that were contaminating the rest of the vineyard. From all appearances, it was a wholesome, healthy, handsome tree. It had only one fault, and that was it did not do the one thing it was intended to do.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "There is only one sin ultimately, and that is the steadfast refusal to be one's own true self." The fig tree

was guilty of that. Israel was guilty of that, and we ourselves are guilty of that. If we would ever become what God would have us to be, we must deepen our understanding of sin. And this logically means that we must deepen our understanding of repentance.

There are, without question, some things in our lives that don't belong there. They keep us from being our own true selves. Don't overlook these things. Go ahead and repent of lying, cheating, stealing, greed, gossip, adultery, and all the rest. We must not stop there. Our repentance must also include some figs, some productive living, some positive action.

In our day we are constantly reminded of shortages. There is a shortage of fuel, a shortage of food, a shortage of fresh water, a shortage of clean air. But these are only part of the story. There is also a shortage of love, a shortage of goodwill, a shortage of understanding, a shortage of justice, a shortage of peace, a shortage of truth. These shortages, my friends, are due to the sterility of our lives. Where will these things come from, if not from us?

It is not enough for you and me to be nice and clean and good. We must be good for something. In this Lenten season, let us not forget the positive kind of repentance. This old world is hurting for love. Let us resolve that, some of that love will flow from us. **Amen.**