

SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday of Hisnag
(Second Sunday of Advent)

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 13:1-9

THE URGENCY OF REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION

In today's reading, Luke continues recounting our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem; a journey that would end with the Cross. Luke uses this section of his Gospel to assemble those teachings of Jesus that were meant to prepare His disciples for the difficult days ahead, and for their ministry and message to the world after His Resurrection.

Luke's literary technique is to link the various teachings with key words or concepts. Jesus' previous teachings included the necessity of a clear acknowledgment that Jesus is the Son of Man, the divine King. The disciples must also properly view worldly possessions, entertaining no anxiety concerning their own physical needs, but give generously for the needs of others. They must constantly be on the alert to serve their Master realizing the significance of the day in which they live.

Jesus also had teachings for the thousands who thronged around Him. Our lesson for today is a continuation of His address to the crowd concerning the urgency of their situation *vis-à-vis* God and the judgment to come.

SYNTAXIS READING

Luke 13:1-9

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

And He began telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?'

And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.' "

NOTES

Now on the same occasion

This is the same occasion as that of last Sunday's reading. Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem, addressed a great crowd of thousands that had gathered around Him and His disciples.

there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

The Greek verb is generally translated by commentators as "there were some present." This translation would mean that these people with the report were not newly arrived and so had been listening to the teachings. However it is possible to translate the verb as "some had come." This translation would put the reporters as people just joining the crowd, hearing only the last admonition. Either way, Jesus' discussion of going before a magistrate for judgments, may have triggered the report on the actions of Pilate, the governor whose duty it was to act as judge.

The Galileans had gone to the court of the Temple to offer sacrifices. It was the custom for the men (not the women or children) to go into the court where the animals were slain and place their hands on the heads of the sacrifice as an act of identification. They would then slay the animal themselves.¹

These Galileans must have gotten involved in some political action that incited the Roman governor's ire before arriving at the Temple. Pilate was known to be particularly brutal. The act of sending Roman soldiers into the sacred courts of the Temple was tantamount to sacrilege. Evidently the men were slain as they were standing by their slain sacrifices.

And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered this *fate*?"

Jesus' response does not address the political situation or the cause of Pilate's cruel action. Instead He addressed a common belief that was also the concern of the Old Testament Book of Job, that is, that bad things happen to bad people.

I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Jesus turns the focus away from the sin of the Galileans to the sins of the crowd. All are sinful. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for one's past sins; it is an active turning from the old path to a

¹See Leviticus 1:2-5; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:23-24, 29, and 33.

new God-ward path of righteousness. This had been the message of John the Baptist. “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!” They were being called into active service for the King. If they rejected this call to participate in the kingdom, they would perish.

Or do you suppose that those eighteen, on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?

Jesus introduced His own example of unexpected tragedy. The Galileans suffered because of the cruel act of men. The example Jesus introduced involved a natural catastrophe. In this example, He also balanced Jerusalemites with the former example of Galileans to include all parts of the nation. He balanced “sinners” with “culprits” (debtors) to include all types of misdeeds.

Siloam was an area at the south-east corner of the Jerusalem walls. The tower was probably the tower of the wall at that point. There was a pool there; however we are not given the reason why the tower collapsed.

Jesus’ point was that unexpected disaster can overtake anyone at anytime for any reason. If it happened to these people who were no more sinful than anyone else, it could happen to anyone.

I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

All are sinners against God and are His debtors. The example of natural disasters also applies to all. None of us knows what the next moment holds.

Jesus did not mean that the unrepentant would die exactly in the same way as the Galileans or the eighteen Jerusalemites, but that unrepentant persons will die unprepared to meet God.

And He began telling this parable:

This parable will not be explained by Jesus. It is self evident in light of the preceding discussion. The parable is an example of opportunity that must be utilized in time before disaster strikes. However, commentators have still sought to allegorize it.²

“A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard;

Evidently, this was not an unusual situation. Grains were forbidden by Deuteronomic law to be sown in a vineyard, but fruit-bearing trees were not forbidden to be planted there.³

and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any.

“He” is a reference to the owner. It was a barren tree. It was unproductive.

And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any.

A good tree will bear more than one crop per year. Obviously the tree was mature and should have been producing figs for several years. The owner had been patient.

Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’

The owner decided that the tree was worthless and was utilizing nutrients other productive plants might use. The vineyard keeper was ordered to cut it down.

² For example: the owner is seen to picture God the Father, the vineyard is Israel, the vine dresser is Christ, and the fig tree is Jerusalem (Lenski); the fig tree is seen to be the nation Israel (Plummer).

³ Deuteronomy 22:9 (That this is a reference to grains is the way the verse is generally taken, however, because fruit trees have seeds, it is not entirely clear what is meant.)

And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer;

The vineyard keeper appealed for more time for the tree, one more year. Meanwhile he would do everything possible to encourage the tree’s productivity.

and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*;

“Fine” is not part of the original verse, the thought is left hanging in mid-air.

but if not, cut it down.’ ”

If after the short probation period, the tree remained fruitless, even the vineyard-keeper would agree it must be destroyed.

APPLICATION

In Topeka, Kansas, there is a church that attracted the news media. The leaders of the church had organized demonstrations at the funerals of US soldiers killed in Iraq. They carried hateful placards and encouraged their children to desecrate the American flag. Apparently the Kansas church had connected the deaths of the soldiers with what they believe was God’s judgment of homosexuality.

Soon after, at an Armenian young people’s group, this news item was discussed. The shocked teens had the impression that the ministers of the Kansas church taught that the soldiers were guilty of something and so were responsible for their own deaths; that they got what they deserved. Bad things happen to bad people.

We too are shocked. No matter what our position is about war, we all want our soldiers to come home safe and sound. We cannot understand demonstrators who condemn the dead soldiers and cause the families so much pain at a time of deepest sorrow. Yet, how are the accusations made by the leaders of the Kansas church different from those who reported the deaths of the Galileans to Jesus? They too were thinking: bad things happen to bad people. A bad thing happened to the Galileans so they must have been very bad indeed.

Or, how often have you heard, or even said yourself, when something awful happens, “What did I do to deserve this?” Jesus answers that question with, “Nothing worse than anyone else.” Bad things happen. Sometimes tragedies are caused by the cruelty of others as in the Armenian genocide. Sometimes tragedies are caused by natural disasters such as the earthquake in Gyumri or the tsunami in Indonesia. Those who suffer tragedies are not more sinful than other people.

Jesus wants us to view tragedies in a different way. He wants us to view them as demonstrations of the sudden unexpected terminus of life. They should teach us that life is uncertain, we cannot be sure of tomorrow. Knowing this, we are urged to be prepared and not delay—prepared to meet our God before it is forever too late.

What can we do to be prepared to meet God at our death? We must change our direction in life. Instead of walking away from God, we must walk with Him. Our interests should be His interests, our goals, His goals. Our life devoted to His service. This is what

repentance is. Of course repentance involves regret for our sins; but it is regret because we have failed the One we have come to love and trust.

The parable of the fig tree is Jesus' way of teaching us the urgency of repentance. Though our loving God has been patient with us for so many years, He will not be patient forever. He has done everything possible to help us. If we do not turn to Him now, our time may soon be over and our last chance wasted.

There once lived a man before the flood of Noah. His name was Enoch. Moses tells us that Enoch walked with God and one day, as they were walking, God took Enoch— Enoch never died. That event was once explained like this: “One day Enoch and God were walking along and God said to Enoch, ‘We are closer to My house than to yours, Come home with Me.’ ” May we all be like Enoch, walking with God, our dearest Master and Friend. Sudden death will hold no fears for us, for the God we meet will be the God whose nail pierced hand we hold.