

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

St. Luke 13:1-9

In 2010 a 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit Haiti killing almost a quarter-of-a-million people. A few weeks following that an 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Chile killed almost five hundred people. And then shortly afterwards again floods in Uganda caused mudslides and the estimated death-toll was 350 people. Modern technology has made news of these events accessible to us at any and every time. These events happen with such regularity that we sometimes take no notice of them. When there is news of suicide-bombers in Iraq or street riots in Paris we tend to tune out because we have heard it all before. We are more likely to take notice of events such as bushfires in New South Wales or flooding in Queensland.

We ask ourselves why these things happened to these people. Why did a quarter-of-a-million die in Haiti and only five hundred in Chile even though it was the larger of the two earthquakes? Did the people of Haiti deserve to die? Were they more evil than the people of Chile? Do we rank the evil of people and God's punishment of them by the numbers who die in these disasters so that the Haitians are the most evil, the Ugandans the least evil, and the Chileans somewhere in between?

In this Gospel of St. Luke the Lord was speaking to a crowd of many thousands; so many that they were trampling on one another. Some of the people in the crowd told the Lord of the latest news from Jerusalem and Judaea, looking for His comments on these current events. They told the Lord of what happened to some Galileans. The details are unclear but it is suggested that some Galileans, people from the Lord's home, were in the Temple offering sacrifices. They became overwhelmed by the setting with its overtones of Jewish nationalism inspired by stories of past glories and former independence and

started to speak and demonstrate against Roman rule. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, quickly put down their rebellion and butchered the people upon the very altars they had just offered their sacrifices. In return, the Lord reminded them of what had happened in a village of Jerusalem. Siloam had a water reservoir from which Jerusalem drew its water. Pilate had built an aqueduct, or an open gutter supported on towers, to transport the water to the city, and it was during its construction that one of the towers collapsed and killed eighteen men.

The people at the time argued that the tragic deaths of the men and women in the Temple and the builders in Siloam was deserved because they were obviously worse sinners and so more guilty than those who survived. There is something primeval within us that says good luck is a blessing and bad luck is a curse from God. In the Gospel of St. John it is very clear in the episode in which the Lord cures the man born blind from birth but the disciples ask: "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (*Jn. 9:2*). To this the Lord answers: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (*Jn. 9:3*) In other words, the tragedies that plague humanity are not punishments from God, but rather God uses them to draw us to repent of our sins and to orient ourselves ever more closely with Him. The Lord says it is not that the people in Jerusalem nor the men in Siloam were worse sinners and so more guilty that they died. They died because of the evil of Pilate and because of a terrible accident. However, if we look on these tragedies as death then we, unless we make our confession and make up for the suffering we cause and align ourselves completely and courageously with Christ then our own deaths will not simply be seen as a tragedy but will be a tragedy because we have forsaken the fullness of our humanity for our sin and pride.

The death of all those men and women and children who die in natural disasters is a tragedy, but a tragedy that can be overcome because it can be transformed in Christ into life in the Kingdom of God. The greater tragedy is the

death of you or me if, in this life, we avoid confronting the suffering we cause to others, when we deny the rights of man and the rights of God, when our fear and pride keep us from the confessional and make us lazy or resentful to good works, because that this a tragedy that cannot be overcome or transformed in Christ. Not because God cannot do this, but because our free will is so sacred that not even God will act against it—even to bring us to Heaven.

Unless we choose to love God in this world we will not have the chance to love Him in the next.