

Introduction

Lent is an important time in the church year. It is a time to pray, to reflect, to repent, to give. It is really a time when we nurture our inner lives and our communal responsiveness as preparation to celebrate the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

But Lent is also a time when we reflect and prepare for the continuing death and resurrection that occurs in each one of us, each day of our lives. Jesus' death and resurrection are not just historical events that took place many years ago but they are also continuing inner events that require our ongoing attention.

For me, Lent is perhaps my favorite time of year, filled with much consolation; but it is also perhaps my most difficult, my most trying, and my most reflective time of the church year. I feel emotion building at unexpected times during this season – responses to liturgy, communion, and prayer.

I was reflecting the other day on our Ash Wednesday service here at Zion – that gathering seemed sacred somehow, didn't it? There seems something about worshipping in the evening that draws us into a deeper reflective silence – appropriate for Lent. Then we listened to God's Word, celebrated communion, and traced a cross on each other's foreheads and hearing the words – *"remember you are dust, and to dust shall you return"*. Sacred, humbling, urgent.

How we live will not go on forever – our health, our security, our families - have been or will all be shaken to their core at some point in each of our lives. *Remember we are dust...*

Lest we believe that life in Christ is just a harmless Sunday routine – casual, calm and pretty – Lent reminds us of the realities of sin and our own brokenness...before the celebration of the risen Lord arrives at Easter. Lent reminds us to pray. It reminds us of the fruits of grace-filled lives – *to serve, to stand with, to walk together* here, and to share the Spirit of God's Word with the world.

During Lent, each of our prayers could appropriately begin:

Lord, let the Word of the living God increase and spread, and let it begin with me.

The two parts of the text***The cause of suffering***

In the first part of our text (verses 1-5) Jesus is asked who is at fault when tragedies occur, if those people who had been ruthlessly killed by Pilate or those who died in the collapsing tower of Siloam were indeed greater sinners than those spared.

Jesus is quick to respond:

“I tell you, no! But unless *you* repent, *you too* will all perish.” (13:3)

It was a difficult question for some then, and some now would probably like to ask it too. If we look around us or listen to the news or read the newspaper we quickly realize what we know is true – Siloam is not the last tower to fall, and Herod is not the last person to ruthlessly kill people.

Repent – Turn Around

Jesus does not answer the question of why innocent people suffer but he does proclaim that the victims did nothing wrong and then urged all to repent (*turn around* is a more literal translation). This was certainly not what the people asking the question were thinking they would get as a response..."What, me, repent? Why me?"

Jesus had a habit of doing this, often to shake up the established way of thinking about things. And Jesus clearly wanted to shake the security of those who believed that good fortune is in any way tied to merit or good works.

Jesus is urgent in his request for action – *repent...*

...not because he is vindictive or seeks punishment but because life is short, life is precious, life is sacred. Anne and I speak about this more often during Lent – little in life, beyond God’s presence and love, is promised to us, perhaps especially not time. *If you think about it, Jesus shows more concern with why people live barren lives than he does about why people die senseless deaths at the hands of Herod or in the towers of Siloam!*

Perhaps it is true what is said that “the only deadly sin is to swim on the surface of things, where we never see, find, or desire God or love.”

I must say that I had a tough time with the “repent or perish” section of the text. It has the ring of judgement and penalty – not at all the way I view God or grace. But as I reflected on these words last week it did remind me of our world and ourselves – we are fully saint, yes, but also sinful and broken.

We do not always get the most out of our lives, or live or accept all of who we are in Christ. Lent calls us into renewed relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God.

With this in mind I began asking myself what this word *repentance* is really asking of us.

The poet Mary Oliver, in her poem “The Summer Day”, perhaps sums it up well:

“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Repentance is not something to be ashamed of, to run away from; it is the way for us to reclaim “the one wild and precious life” that we have been entrusted with.

Repentance is the way of becoming who we most authentically are, living life as forgiven Christians in a kingdom already apparent but also yet to be realized.

And, *repentance* is a means of choosing to align our lives with lives of hope and faith in Christ, as fruits of grace.

Lent helps us look at these choices. It helps us reflect on something deeper.

At my parents' church a few months ago the pastor told the story of our deliverance from sin by Jesus' sacrifice for us. He took out a clay pot and shattered it with a hammer right there during the sermon. It was a powerful metaphor.

But the story did not end there...

After the service my father, an artist, carefully picked up each piece of this shattered pot. He brought it home and began the painstaking process of gluing back together the pieces he had retrieved.

And here it is...(repaired pot presented)

It now tells a new story of what God does for us each day of our lives. God's healing love surrounds us, embraces us, holds us together, and redeems us. During Lent we are asked to reflect on this work in our lives...and to respond.

The fig tree – our lives

It is no coincidence that this part of the text is followed by the parable about the fig tree, our lives. It asks us where our lives are bearing fruit, and where they are not. It asks us:

How do we nurture, care for, and enliven our lives and our relationships?

Which of our priorities could be adjusted?

How are we living right now?

What could we become?

What could Zion become if we desired it? ***Imagine...***

...we are healthy church in so many ways: good numbers of members, plenty of youth and young people (and they have great ideas, as I continue to discover during confirmation class), dedicated seniors, and are financially well off. There are so many gifts here at Zion. *We could become whatever we can dream of becoming.*

Meister Eckhart once said:

"When the soul wants to experience something she throws out an image in front of her and then steps into it."

What image would the soul of this church throw out in front of it, and how would we step into it?

How does our response to the needs around us invite us into activity?

What does being a part of the team which is bringing a refugee family to Stratford tell us about us?

From engagement with others we can begin to understand who we are and what our mission is.

The parable of the fig tree helps us in this because it assures us that we are not journeying alone. Jesus, the gardener, is with us at every turn. He is “digging around...and fertilizing “our lives, joining us exactly where we are, and welcoming us into the Easter mystery.

Conclusion

God loves us; he is breathing faith and grace into the centre of our lives and the hearts of our communities always – here today too.

Despite the *Tyrants that kill* and *towers that fall...*

...there is at work on a still more fundamental level a love which seeks to enter and transform our lives and the lives and all people.

It is the love of *grace within grace within grace*...it even waits for us when our lives do not bear fruit.

Yet it is also a love that asks us *urgently* to seize the graciousness of God;
to assent to God’s call for us to live fully;
to embrace each other;
to help those trapped under the weight of poverty, want, and devastation of all kinds; and
to remember that life is sacred, holy, eternal - and that all of life...

“... hangs like a drop of dew on a blade of grass.” (W. B. Yeats)

We are in the middle of the season of Lent – a time to reflect, to repent, to pray and to give.

Lord, let the Word of the living God increase and spread, and let it begin with me.

Amen