

"A Year of Grace"

We are blessed with two lessons in today's Holy Gospel reading. The first is about the hard-hearted Pontius Pilate who slaughtered a group of Galileans at the Temple, with their blood being mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. There is nothing else in the Scriptures about this incident or even about the character of Pilate, other than what we read in the trial of Jesus, and how he washes his hands. We need to look deeper. We need to look at the historical documents that have more information about this man – Pontius Pilate, and what he did. The best and most reliable information found in the historian Flavius Josephus.' He wrote a book called "Antiquities of the Jews – it is actually Book XV¹¹¹" in which there is evidence that Pilate had reason to suspect those Galilean pilgrims who were worshipping at the temple of planning an uprising. And so, He sent in some of his troops, right into the temple courtyard, while those Jews were offering up their religious sacrifices. Pilate's men struck them down in their very act of worship. The blood of these slain pilgrims was mixed in with the blood of their animal sacrifices. This was an extremely horrific and outrageous crime in the eyes of the Jews. For the pagan Romans to desecrate the sacred temple grounds in that way,

- to go into an area where Gentiles were not allowed to go,
- to defile the holy sacrifices, to slaughter Jews going about their religious duty–
- this was just outrageous! A most brutal and horrible death! It had to be reminiscent of the days before Jesus was born, when the Maccabees held the Temple, because the Syrian king – Antiochus Epiphanes sacrificed a pig on the altar of the Temple. He was desecrating their holy spot.

Bloodshed was not uncommon for the Romans in confrontations with the Jews. We only have to think of what they did during the crucifixion.

On our Wednesday night program – I shared with the adults the first hour of the film the Passion of the Christ. It is a different version – with the same actors – only instead of being in Aramaic – it is in English. There are no subtitles – and you hear the words spoken in English by Jim Caviezel and all of the other actors. I have a real problem watching a movie and being distracted by subtitles. I cannot concentrate on what is going on. We are very blessed to have this copy that was dubbed in English and other languages as well.

Pilate was not a 'good guy.' He ruled as if he owned everything. Pilate at one point seized the Temple Treasury funds just so that he could build an aqueduct. There were uprisings and bloodshed at the drop of a hat. There was an unhealthy relationship between the Jews, the Temple leaders, the Roman government, the Roman governor and the Roman Army. The coming judgement was inescapable – and could come at any moment. The life of the Jew in the first century consisted of three major elements:

- life is uncertain
- death is unpredictable
- and judgement is inevitable.

Jesus made it clear that the time to repent was now. Waste no time!

In the second major part of the Gospel reading Jesus speaks of a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, *'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'*

In this parable, the owner is generally regarded as representing God the Father, who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and came seeking fruit. The gardener, called the vinedresser, is Jesus. Fig trees were common trees in that part of the world and would rarely be planted in vineyards because the deep roots and large branches take much ground that would otherwise be used for the grapevine. His livelihood was with grapes and not with figs.

The fig tree was often seen as a symbol for Israel and I think in one sense Jesus is giving those people a last chance to come to Him, to hear His Word, proclaim His Lordship and repent. I want to suggest to you another meaning here as well. The tree in this parable may also refer to a believer who has heard the gospel of Christ by faith for salvation. In either case, what the parable shows to us is Jesus offering a chance for repentance and forgiveness of sin, showing His awesome grace and mercy toward His believers.

The three years, I believe, refers to the length of time of Jesus' ministry tool place. On the surface one might see that this is the time it took for a fig tree to bear fruit. The fig tree was given the opportunity to be in the vineyard where it otherwise should not have been as well as the needed time to bear fruit – three years. The gardener, who is Jesus, stands up for his fig tree and has offered to cultivate it and so it will produce fruit. We see mercy in this parable, but it is still a warning of the urgency of repentance. The time until judgement is extended for just a short time.

For three years the owner of the vineyard has looked for fruit, time enough for the tree to produce fruit, but there was none. Israel is not a big country. Land was precious, so something that was unfruitful could not be allowed to use resources that could better be used by a fruitful one. To look at this more closely – the gardener intercedes – to intercede he goes in and makes a case for - seeking more time for the fig tree to be given one last chance. Remember, this is a vineyard – and usually grapes are grown – not figs – signifying that the harvest consists of many kinds -just as the world of Jesus' time consisted mostly of Jews – but remember that the world would soon be opened to the Gentile as well. You just have to look at John chapter 21 when Jesus told the disciples to throw the net over the other side of the boat – and that meant bring in Gentiles.

The parable of the fig tree should show that our lives today are filled with hope – as we are invited to consider the gift of another year of life as a gift of God's mercy. John the Baptist

The Third Sunday of Lent- March 24, 2019, Year C

declared that the ax lay at the root, poised to strike: “*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*” (Luke 3:9) We can take solace in knowing that the gardener pleads for and is granted one more year. The year that Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4:19 in the synagogue in Nazareth is “*the year of the Lord’s favor.*” A year of forgiveness, restoration and second chances. What great hope for those who have not yet accepted Jesus, or have held onto unrepented sin. Many people say that they are Christians and pray all of the time – and that is a wonderful thing – but if you are holding onto something that you have not given to Jesus and said, ‘look I screwed up – I was wrong’ and have not asked for forgiveness – then you have not received forgiveness. It is a good time to do it. Live each day in a way that you have no fear of giving an account on how you have used God’s precious gift.

Let me close with an important question: What would you do if you if you only had a year left to live, a short time to make up for wrongs done and opportunities missed? What would the first this be that you would do? How very important that year might be to you! Jesus’ lesson of the fig tree is a challenge for each us to live each day as a precious gift from God. It reminds us to live each day in a way that you will have no fear of giving an account for how you used God’s precious gift. We live in a year of grace.