

**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 24, 2019**  
**Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass**  
**of the**  
**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**  
**celebrated at**  
**St. Joseph Catholic Church**  
**Scranton, PA**  
**Luke 13:1-9**

Jesus is very careful to explain in today's Gospel that sudden death by accident or even by the hand of the wicked does not imply God's judgment upon the deceased. He makes clear that those who were killed by Pilate in the Temple and those on whom the tower of Siloam fell were not worse sinners or offenders than their contemporaries. He uses the incidents as a means to call His listeners to repentance, declaring, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." The sudden death of people we know should lead us to repentance.

Here we see both the value and the urgency of returning to a state of grace if we have fallen into mortal sin. The truth is that we don't know when our time may come; so it behooves us to go to confession regularly and also daily to make an act of contrition for the sins we have committed over the course of each day. Thus, if we should die suddenly, like the people we heard about in today's Gospel, we will not perish, which is to say, go to hell. We are all appointed to die in the end; the only question is whether we will go to heaven or hell. To perish is not simply to die a physical death but, in this context, to suffer eternal damnation.

Note, however, that repentance for Jesus involves far more than simply ceasing to sin, more than receiving forgiveness for the sins of our past life; to repent means we also must bear fruit. As the fig tree grows and matures, it is not doing anything wrong. It is not actively sinning, so to speak. But also is not doing anything good, for it is not bearing fruit. Our lives as Christians are to be more than merely neutral. Of course, we aren't to do evil, but that's not the end. To repent fully is to bear fruit that benefits others and that gives glory to the owner of the vineyard, our heavenly Father.

We should think of repentance, therefore, as a 180° turn away from wickedness. If facing west is to sin, facing north is not our final destination. That's just 90° and must be considered progress, for we are no longer killing God's life within us and encouraging others to do the same to themselves. But to do righteousness, by which fruits are borne, is to go another 90° and face east, where the sun rises, where the Son rose from the dead. We are fulfilling the Lord's will for our lives when we not only know detachment from sin, but also do the good works that are the natural fruit of holiness.

Today's Gospel teaches us that God's mercy is such that he is both patient and responsive to intercessory prayer on behalf of those slow to bear fruit. In the parable that Jesus tells after imploring us to repent, there are both the owner of the vineyard and the vinedresser. The owner naturally wants to see the trees he has planted produce a return on His investment. He asks, "Why should it use up the ground?" when speaking of the fig tree that for three years has not borne any fruit. So he has already demonstrated patience with the fruitless tree when the vinedresser gets the fig tree a little more time, another chance. The owner of the vineyard is ready to cut down the tree, but the vinedresser intercedes; and the tree is given one more year, after which it will be cut down if it doesn't bear fruit.

As I read this parable, I thought of the countless souls who had interceded for me during that time in my life when I had lost my attachment to sin, yet had not yet begun to bear fruit, at least, not the fruit God intended for me. I am grateful for those Catholics who knew me during my days as an Anglican clergyman, and who prayed regularly that my family and I would be reconciled to holy Mother Church. This includes members of my own family, people I had encountered at weddings and funerals, priests whom I knew through ecumenical relations, and all those strangers my friends had recruited in the effort. Their intercessions, combined with God's merciful patience, had the desired effect, and on the day of my confirmation a good number of those prayer warriors revealed themselves to me and told me of their intercession.

If we can recall a time in our lives when we were not bearing the fruit that God intended, we ought to give thanks for those who interceded on our behalf, those generous souls in heaven and on earth who prayed constantly that the Lord be patient with us, those whose prayers finally prompted us to come into repentance fully and bear fruit to God's honor and glory.

Our gratitude for such prayers should lead us to offer up intercessions of our own. Whom do we know who requires our prayers? For whom shall we pray, in order that God's merciful patience may be extended and our loved one may finally begin bearing the fruit God intended for him from the foundation of the world? A good Lenten discipline always involves an increase in our prayer life, and we may increase its fruitfulness by being specific about our intentions. For whom might our prayers mean the difference between life and death? Who is in most need of God's patience? Who most urgently needs to start bearing fruit? To offer all those prayers is to fulfill our role as a vinedresser.

We might also recognize in ourselves the fig tree. Perhaps we sense that the urgency Jesus communicates applies to us. In this case, there is no shame in seeking the help of those who can intercede on our behalf. Each of us ought to ask himself whose powerful intercession would help me to begin bearing the fruit God intends. Who among the saints and angels, as well as the Church here on earth, will be heard before the Throne of Grace? Not only who is interceding for me, but whose intercession shall I seek?