



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Exodus 3:1-15
Second Reading Corinthians 10:1-13
Gospel Luke 13:1-9

There is an old story told about the man who bought a mule from a friend. The animal had been described as obedient and responsive, but the buyer discovered upon getting home with it that it didn't take directions or obey, but only stood impassively in the yard. So the man took the mule back to his friend to complain. The friend listened patiently and then went over and picked up a 2X4 board. He then hauled back and hit the poor mule squarely between the eyes. "Lie down!" commanded the previous owner, and the mule did indeed lie down. "You see," said the man, "the mule does obey, but first you have to *get its attention.*"

A rather rustic story, perhaps, but nevertheless true. Sometimes our sophistication can get in the way. Yes, we can still use the more sophisticated tools at our disposal to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" even the Scriptures' message. God gave us these tools to use. For example, in today's second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he uses the best tools of his own time, the commentaries of the Jewish rabbis, to understand two mentions of a rock that spouts water in the book of Exodus. The rabbis tried to figure it out and came up with the idea that it must have been one rock that moved through the desert. That was good enough for Paul. Modern bible scholars understand that there were two accounts of this rock in the Old Testament that both got written into Exodus- no moving rock in this case, just

incomplete editing. Does that detract from the value of Scripture- only if one can't handle human inconsistency and fallibility, and if that is the case then there will be a lot of other problems, too, beyond living with the realities of what the Bible really says and what it doesn't say!

But perhaps the most difficult passage for us to deal with today is the Gospel reading from Luke in which Jesus is asked about two current events: one of them man-made and the other apparently one of those things that insurance people like to call "an act of God." In religious professional jargon, this issue is called theodicy, the "justness of God". It is asking the difficult and scary question, "Why does God do what He does?" Very often, there is no good answer. And in fact, even Jesus side-steps the issue in his response. "The people from Galilee who were slaughtered by the Romans, and the workers who died in the construction accident- were they more sinful than those who survived?" "No," is Jesus' answer and we sophisticated believers of the 21st century can heave a sigh of relief. We don't want the Lord to be simplistic about such things because it would affect our views of God as loving and forgiving. We don't want a god who talks through bushes or moves rocks through the desert, but something that fits in with our modern ideas about science and spirituality. We want a god who loves just about everybody and who automatically forgives all our faults. We want a "nice" god who stays out of our way until he is needed and doesn't demand of us anything that we haven't already decided to do. So even though it begs the question, and even though we are still left with the nagging issue of Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People, Jesus simple "No" is comfortable...until we hear His next words!

"Unless you repent you will all perish as they did." This isn't comfortable. This isn't "nice." It sounds abrasive, vindictive- almost cruel. It shows us an angry God, or at least one whose sense of justice is rather finely honed and who can't be depended on to give us that "one more chance" that we have come to expect. Jesus is speaking for God as He thunders, "You're not taking me seriously! You're not listening!"

Our Lord's words have to do with moral responsibility: the recognition that even sophisticated 21st century people need to realize that all acts have repercussions-

“what goes around comes around.” God has put us in an orderly universe in which there are implications to our behavior, for good or for ill. Jesus is telling us that again in the Gospel story.

Accountability is not a particularly strong part of our culture here in the Philippines. We are far too willing to find excuses for what we do that goes wrong. We don't want to accept that sometimes, in fact most of the time; we can't pass the blame on if we are the source. “You will die like the men in the construction accident” may sound incredibly harsh from the Prince of Peace, but every once in a while we need to be hit square between the eyes, to get our attention.

But even this “hard saying” of Jesus isn't without its message of mercy and compassion. It comes from the last part of today's Gospel in which we hear about the fig tree. The farmer is tempted to uproot the poor tree because it hasn't borne any fruit. Instead, he gives it another chance- “one more year”- to fulfill its purpose and bear figs.

The purpose of God hitting us between the eyes from time to time is not just to punish us, not just to cause us irrational pain or even to enact vengeance for disobedience. If God didn't want us to develop into moral men and women, responsible, and accountable for our actions, then He wouldn't have given us moral codes and commandments to guide the way. And even so, He is not to be taken for granted, and not to be trifled with. We are here today to remind ourselves of that fact- to kneel before His mercy and reaffirm our resolve to follow, to obey, and to grow. That is the will of our loving Father who wants the best for us, erring children, however sophisticated we may think we are.