

March 3 ASC Lent 3 GGW

This past week as another month ends and this one begins, I realize as many of us do that some bills are due: in my case it is usually rent, electric, and cable. I am very cognizant of the fact that if I do not pay the bills that I could get a shut-off notice for services or an eviction notice and if you have ever had to face that situation, it is unnerving. I speak from personal experience many years ago in one of those categories.

What Jesus is talking about in today's gospel is last chances and our own mortality.

The first story is about that nasty Pontius Pilate, who had been ruling Israel for about four years and had been extremely cruel in the manner in which he put down riots in this case by mixing the blood of Galileans that he had executed with the

blood of Jewish sacrifices. This was not only offensive but also disgusting, revolting and sickening. It was just plain repulsive to all Jews.

Jesus realized that many people were thinking that the Galileans were killed and then their blood was mixed with the blood of sacrifices because they were terrible sinners perhaps even the worst of sinners. He said that is not the case but it is a case where each of us must think about our own lives and how we are living them.

We also must come to terms with our own death which may be an unexpected and abrupt death. I would add that all death is either unexpected or accidental in some sense. His meaning is that we should question how we are with the Lord God. Are we ready to die suddenly like the Galileans and are we ready to meet God face to face?

Indeed how are we with our poor neighbors or our families and friends?

The message here is that there is time to repent and turn our lives around and return to the Lord. Otherwise we will die eternally. There is still time to change our ways.

Now I do not want to read too much into this but in a sense I think this might be part of the thinking of Benedict XVI who went into retirement this week. I am not implying he has been a great sinner but perhaps he has felt that the burdens of the papacy were preventing him from the godly life that he wished to live so that in the autumn and winter of his life he has chosen to get closer to God through prayer and meditation. Perhaps all the distractions in the church for Benedict were a road block to his journey and he was not

physically and mentally well enough to take on those issues?

We, unfortunately, do not have the ability to retreat and reflect as Benedict is doing.

Christians have often reflected on their lives to be sure that what they say or do is pleasing to God. The great reformer Johnathan Edwards spent part of each night going over a list of self questions designed to help him live a good Christian life.

This is something we all can do. Have we spoken well of others today? Have we spoken badly of others today? And so on. Such reflection is cleansing. And if we fall short, we would like Jonathan Edwards repent and try to make amends.

I believe this is a practice which is the purpose of all monastic living and this is the life which Benedict XVI has entered.

So while we may not have the ability or time to do an exhaustive self accounting on a daily basis, perhaps doing some self examination would benefit us a great deal and certainly do us no harm.

Then there was the second disaster about the eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell over near Siloam. Yes, that was tragic for eighteen men, women and children. How can that be explained? Were they worse sinners than others? No, they were not and while they died so unexpectedly we learn that we should be ready at all times to meet God. Are we ready?

When the World Trade Center building collapsed killing so many, were they bad people? Were they worse than us? No, not at all: but it is a reminder that in our survival all of us have been given more time to get our lives in order.

From these two incidents we learn that some people die from unexpected aggression or accident; speculation on whether they deserved to die is useless; life is uncertain for everyone, and we need to be ready for death by repenting and turning back to God.

Finally, Jesus tells us the parable of the fig tree which more clearly teaches his lesson. A man planted a fig tree in his garden and he came for three years looking to see fruit from the tree. After three years he becomes frustrated with the

tree and tells the gardener to cut the tree down because it has produced no figs.

I do not know anything about fig trees but I do think the meaning of the story is clear.

The gardener says, “No sir, give it another year to produce figs. One more year. Some more time. Some more space. Let me dig around the roots and put good manure on it. If after a year, it still does not produce figs, then let’s cut it down.”

Now we all know that unproductive trees and vegetation is both a waste of time and energy. And by all rights, they should be taken down or pulled out of the ground for they do not fulfill their purposes.

The message here is also that God is a patient God. He wants to give us another chance, one more chance, another season, another year, more space to begin living lives in ways that He would expect. God’s patience is great but it does not last forever.

We have been created to be loving people and to live lives of love for God and our neighbors. This sounds so simple, yet it seems to be very hard.

So maybe we might take the time especially during this Lent to create and make for ourselves a short checklist for some self examination which we might go through each night which will not only make us right with ourselves but also our families, friends and even God Himself. Amen