

3rd Sunday of Lent (C)  
(Exodus 3:1-8. 13-15 / Luke 13:1-9)  
20.03.2022

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today's gospel passage alludes to two distressing events which were reported to Jesus, two distressing events about which we know very little, not to say nothing at all, beyond the scarce details given to us by two gospel verses; first, a group of Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with that of their sacrifices; then, another group of eighteen people on whom the tower at Siloam fell and killed them.

Jesus puts his disciples on their guard against the temptation of considering this kind of event as a result of divine punishment: the effect on these people having sinned against God. Such reasoning would give us a neat cause and effect explanation for suffering. Something evil happens, and we think we know what led to it. It is always reassuring to have an explanation – even if it is a false one – for some distressing event. We can imagine that this helps us move forward. Still today, such an approach can be a temptation for many fundamentalist evangelicals who don't hesitate to declare that a particular natural disaster, or a pandemic or a specific war is God's punishment upon sinful people.

In today's gospel passage, Jesus rejects this kind of reading and interpretation of events. He invites to look at what we see happening in a different way, from a perspective of conversion. He invites us to see everything as an opportunity to reflect upon our lives and reinforce, with the Lord's help, our commitment to change the manner in which we behave.

Distressing events still occur today: just think of the natural disasters which befall us, or the Covid-19 pandemic, or Ukraine's unmotivated invasion and destruction by Russia.

Among the events at the forefront of our thoughts at this period in history, let us take a moment to consider the war between Russia and Ukraine, and especially the person of Vladimir Putin. We could legitimately think and say that Putin is responsible for this evil conflict. Our hearts and minds could be inhabited by a lot of legitimate anger and negative feelings against him. Without denying Putin's responsibility, Jesus invites us to go deeper than that. He invites us to go further in our thought and to look at someone like Putin as an opportunity for our own conversion. This is interesting, for conversion is the main purpose of our engagement upon the Lenten pilgrimage. Let me explain. All that is happening in Ukraine today comes from a human heart, from the heart of the Russian leader and his collaborators. Each one of us is a human being with a human heart. Are we conscious of the fact that, at our own level, all things considered, we could do the same as Vladimir Putin? I guess your surprise at that statement! Am I going too far...?

Perhaps we would not declare war. Nevertheless, does it never happen that our hearts become prisoners of a religious or a political ideology, leading us to think, speak and act in an unreasonable way? Does it not happen that we fail to respect those who are not like us, those who are not "one of us" – to use a term sometimes used here in Northern Ireland. We can be suspicious and hostile towards those who don't think as we think, those from another race than

ours, those of a different colour, milieu, or culture, those from another political, religious or moral spectrum than our own? And does it not happen that we don't look at or speak to these persons? In other words, we can kill them or at least force them to flee and migrate far from our little world toward distant shores. What is happening in Vladimir Putin's heart could happen in our hearts. It is from this perspective that Jesus invites us to look at the unjust war between Russia and Ukraine in a way that has us see it as an opportunity to examine our conscience and repent for all our evil behaviour.

Does it never happen that we have recourse to force, violence and even murder to get what we want? We know that we can murder others not only with fire arms, but also by our thoughts and with our words.

Does it not happen that we look one another in the eyes and lie openly to defend our position up to the point where we no longer know the difference between the truth and a lie? Our lie can become our truth! To tell lies can become for us to speak the truth!

Does it not happen that we are more prone to impose our point of view than to offer it freely, proposing it to others for their consideration? God never imposes himself to us. He only proposes himself to us!

Does it not happen that we cultivate a certain form of secret, of silence, of mystery in order to remain in control of all that is happening around us?

Does it never happen that we destroy instead of building up, that we hate instead of loving?

When this kind of behaviour happens within us or among us, this is evil at work and not God's work.

God is good. He cannot desire evil for his people. He cannot send evil to his people.

We heard the Lord say in our first reading: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow". Such is our God: He is a merciful and saving God! He is a compassionate God!

We were created in the image and likeness of God. Like God, we are called to be merciful and compassionate for all our brothers and sisters in humanity. To allude to the narrative of the Burning Bush, we are called to be flames of fire for one another, flames of fire that enlighten and offer warmth, flames of fire that don't burn up or destroy but give heat to cold hearts!

Let us pray for a conversion of heart and mind of Vladimir Putin and those who surround him. In order to give weight to our prayer, in order to pray honestly, let us examine our own conscience and enter into a process of repentance and conversion. May we engage ourselves on the way of respect and service of all humankind! May we choose to love!