

Third Sunday of Lent—Year C

Jesus' words in the Gospel today bring us, therefore, to the heart of Lent. They remind us that every day we have is a gift from the Lord, but that gift also leads to a task, to bear fruit through a life of faith. In various parables and with different images — from both the financial (the parable of the talents) and the agricultural worlds — the Lord reminds us that he expects us to bear dividends and that we will be judged on the fruit that we bear. The image in today's Gospel makes it clear that we need to do this examination URGENTLY, because God will not wait forever for us to do what he created and called us to do. The Lord, who began this Lent by marking us with ashes and telling us, "Repent and believe in the Gospel," says to us with urgency as he said to his contemporaries after some local disasters, "I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish." We don't want to perish. Jesus doesn't want us to perish and died so that we wouldn't have to. But let's take a serious look about what he says we need to do to prevent that.

2) Jesus explains his point about repentance by referencing the fig tree, which he employed as an analogy for a human life. The owner, who represents God, came looking for fruit in this life, and found none.

So he gave the vine-grower the instruction, "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" Jesus' point is clear: some people waste their lives, not bearing any fruit whatsoever;

Such people merit, according to the parable, to be cut down because, to some degree, they're already dead.

3) The gardener in the parable, however, who represents Jesus, says, "Lord, let it alone for one more year,

Jesus intercedes to give us another chance. He fertilized the soil with his own blood to make it possible for us, but even he says, "If it does not bear fruit, you can cut it down next year." He will go the extra mile so that the barren life has every possible chance, but if it doesn't bear fruit, it will be cut down. We should not try to mince Jesus' words here. Out of love, he, who is "kind and merciful," has given us this parable about the certainty of judgment and the criteria on the basis of which we will be judged. Now it is the time for our response in faith.

4) This parable refers directly to some of us here in this Church right now, if not, perhaps, to all of us.

Whatever time we have is TIME TO BEAR FRUIT. If we have not been producing in abundance for God, we should be thankful that we still have time to do so, although we do not know how much time we have. For some of us, even though we might not know it, this Lent will be our last.

5) Some people think that if they do not commit mortal sins, if they're not harming others, then everything is fine in their relationship with God. In other words, if the fig tree is not harming all of the other trees, then everything is okay. Jesus says clearly that those people are mistaken. Likewise are mistaken those who subscribe to a certain minimalism in the faith, that if they basically try to keep most of the commandments, if they show up to Mass, say a few prayers each day, light a candle or two, put some change in the collection basket, the Lord will be satisfied or perhaps even give them a medal. Jesus says otherwise. The owner of the vineyard is looking for fruitful trees. He's looking for a harvest.

6) So we have two crucial questions this morning. First, "What is the fruit God wants?" And second, "How do I bear that fruit?" In response to the first question, the fruit God wants consists of acts of self-giving love done for others. This is what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount, " Let your light [the reflection of Christ's light] shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). We do this by "loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength"(Mk 12:30) and "loving others as Jesus has loved us" (Jn 15:12). This love is more than a wish or good will toward another, but a work, a concrete act of love. There are fruits that we need to come from our spiritual life, that flow from our relationship of love with God. There are also fruits called the spiritual and the corporal works of mercy that we're called to do out of love for God and others, like passing on the faith to children and colleagues, going the extra mile to care for those who need it. Jesus said clearly that when he comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, he will separate the dead into two groups like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. To those on his right, to those who are saved, he will say, "Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the beginning of the world, for I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty, ... naked, ... ill, ... a stranger, ... in prison ... and you cared for me" (Mt 25:31ff). Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you accursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry, ... thirsty, ... naked, ... ill, ... a stranger, ... in prison ... and you did nothing for me." Jesus didn't give us an exhaustive list of actions, but he did tell us that what we did or failed to do for the least of his brethren, we did or failed to do to him. And on those fruits, or lack thereof, we will be judged.

8) Therefore, to bear fruit, to take advantage of this extra year, to profit from this grace that we have not yet been cut down, we have to concentrate on remaining in Christ. We do this for sure in prayer, but we do it par excellence through the sacraments, in which God fills us with his own life. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, in particular, we receive the body, blood, soul and divinity of the Lord inside of us. Truly he remains within us, like the vine in the branches. He abides in us and, if we receive Him in the state of grace, we abide in Him. Through the Eucharist, we become more and more Whom we eat and remain in Christ. We become walking tabernacles, living monstrances, when we receive Holy Communion; no better way exists to

abide in the Lord; no better chance to do we have bear fruit than remaining in the vine this way. 9) Often we can act take the Eucharist for granted and make the same costly mistake the Israelites committed in the desert. After having been saved by the Lord from the Egyptians, after having walked through the Red Sea which the Lord had parted for them, after having received in the desert manna from heaven and water from a rock, the Israelites continued to complain and failed to thank God for all his blessings. Rather than bear fruit in thanksgiving, they kept trying to say to God, "What have you done for me lately?" About them, St. Paul speaks in the second reading: "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." Despite all those blessings, the apostle said, "God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness."

11) The three Lenten practices of praying, fasting and giving alms, are important helps in keeping us in Christ and bearing fruit with him, because through them, as we heard in Jesus' image of the vine and the branches, our Father the vine grower "prunes" us so that might bear more fruit. On this third Sunday of Lent, we can ask ourselves if we are living these blessed practices with greater love and fidelity during this penitential season. Are we praying more, privately and liturgically? Are we giving more of ourselves to others — of the time God has given us, of the material blessings he bestowed on us, of the talents he has granted us — especially to the most needy? Are we fasting from sin and from material goods so that we can focus more on hungering for the things of heaven?

12) Lent is a gift of time from the Lord so that we might become the type of tree that will bear much fruit, not just out of fear of judgment, not just so that we won't be cut down, but out of love for God who loves us and has given us everything we need to bear fruit. As we approach Christ in the Eucharist, we thank Him for all his blessings — for our baptism, for the privilege to receive his body and blood in the Eucharist, for his forgiveness in confession, and for his great hope in us that we will bear fruit — but especially for giving us more time this Lent, which may be our last, to be fruitful. In the Mass, he is fertilizing the soil so that we might indeed bear ever greater fruit. Through the graces we're about to receive, may we always remain in Christ and, after this Mass, go in peace to bear fruit with Him that will last into eternal life.