

3 Lent C

March 24, 2019

St. Patrick

Theme: In his Lent Jesus grappled with questions, confusion, and fear—as do we.

The last line of the Apostle Paul’s Scripture gives us a sharp warning on this Lenten Sunday:

“So, if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

In today’s Gospel Jesus draws from two lead stories on CNN in his day. One of them, a tower that collapsed and, suddenly, eighteen people crushed to death. A few days from now, as the unprecedented flooding in the Midwest, and elsewhere in our nation, comes south, we’ll hear about folks here—in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they’re swept away by the torrential waters.

Some may imagine that God, at the divine personal computer, might push the “smite” button on those whose lives are unexpectedly snuffed out.

The other story in today’s Gospel, Jesus refers to the story in his time of the ruthless Pilate who mixes the blood of innocent, and randomly chosen, Galileans. Ten days ago we heard of the white nationalist who unleashed a rain of gunfire in the midst of worshippers at mosques in New Zealand. Among the 50 murdered, there was a man from Syria and his young son. When he escaped the bloodbath in Syria, the father chose the safest country in the world for his son and himself—New Zealand.

Yes, some may imagine that God, at the divine personal computer, might have pushed the “smite” button on that Syrian father and his young son. Or, was it just chance—like other sudden tragedies?

Two Sundays ago, our Lent began with the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness, the desert. It set the background for our forty days *this* Lent. There is a haunting painting, done in 1898, by a French artist named Briton Riviere. It’s entitled *The Temptation in the Wilderness* (1). Jesus in the desert for forty days, he sits alone on a rock in the empty barrenness. Our Savior is slumped over, with his palms resting on the rock. It’s like the palms, faced down, are steadying him. He’s looking down, staring into nothing, and we can’t see his face, only his hair sloping over his forehead, and his beard.

Jesus is all alone, staving off temptations from the devil. Fully human, Jesus is slumped over, as if he's trying to make sense of—well, the questions that are unanswerable in life...the hard questions which, at times, keep us sleepless, or staring into the nothingness. Jesus is all alone in the desert—as Thomas Merton put it, in a “sterile paradise of emptiness and rage” (2). Oh, a month from now, Palm Sunday, we'll hear the other end of St. Luke's Gospel, the night before he was crucified, Jesus, on his knees, praying for the heavenly Father to “**remove this cup from me,**” this bitter cup of suffering. Sweating profusely, it seemed “**like great drops of blood.**”

In the desert, for forty days Jesus was sifting out his way to his tortured end. Briton Riviere's painting captures Jesus' grappling with anguish which he couldn't soothe in the desert. With a paint brush, it shows the inner pain such that, Jesus could only look down, staring into his empty lap.

Just before Ash Wednesday, Deacon Frank asked me which of the two possible formulas did I want him to use when he smudged my forehead with ashes. I answered him, right away: “**Remember—you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**” At this season of my life, I need the reminder—that I might stare at it, and know its blunt truth. Actually, we need that reminder at any season of our lives, don't we?

St. Patrick's: Atrocities and accidents, sickness and death—they call us to crisis. They put our lives in its proper focus—at times, we staring in the wilderness, trying to make sense of it all. At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the fig tree—wallowing in its barrenness. It's given, then, a second chance. Notice, friends, how the buds are bursting forth with new life, the new Spring blossoming everywhere and putting a close to the coldness of winter. This Lenten Sunday: Have we born fruit—with as much energy as we have exerted in our business, our work? “**Leave it another year,**” Jesus cautions us. *This* Lent, let his Spirit water our dryness, so that we can truly come to new life on that Easter morning!

- (1) I am very indebted to David J. Unger for his reflections on *The Temptation in the Wilderness* in his article, “I Thought I Knew Him,” Commonweal (March 22, 2019) pg. 47.
- (2) Thomas Merton in Thoughts in Solitude, pg. 21; quoted by Unger, Ibid.

General Intercessions

March 24, 2019

Third Sunday of Lent

**Rain down during this Lent your grace upon us, your church,
that we might bear a rich harvest of love and justice;
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Shepherd your church in love, especially through Bishop David
Talley as he begins his ministry soon as our Bishop of Memphis;
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Deepen the love and closeness within married couples and all
families; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Protect all in the military, firefighters, and other safety personnel
as they protect the common good; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Heal victims of sexual assault, social discrimination, and war;
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Give relief to those suffering from the flooding in our nation, and
from the flooding and cyclones in southern Africa;
we pray to you, O Lord—**

(for the 11:00 a.m. Mass only--)

**Open the gates of heaven for all who die with their hope in your
everlasting love, especially Art Schoembs, on the fourth anniversary
of his death; we pray to you, O Lord--**