

The Gospel reading for this day is not an easy one to digest or to get a handle on it at first. Let's recall the reading.

The people, who were listening to Jesus on that day, brought up the recent horrific episode when Pilate killed a group of Jews in the Temple and mixed their blood with that of the blood of the animals that were being sacrificed! How bizarre is that!

There must have been an uncomfortable silence when Jesus asks them, "***Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?***"

It is the age-old question of the suffering of innocents and Why do bad, evil things happen to innocent, good people? Is it their secret sins, their misdeeds that bring God's judgment?

I understand that Pat Robertson voiced his opinion that it was just that! It was the Haitians own fault making a "pack with the devil in the practice of voodoo" that brought on the massive earthquake last week!

But quite to the contrary, Jesus brings up the collapse of the tower of Siloam that fell on and killed eighteen persons (very much like the earthquake in Haiti) and rhetorically asks, "***Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?***"

His answer to that question (hear the word of the Lord brother Pat) is a resounding "***No, I tell you.***"

However, the next words of Jesus are quite befuddling. "No, I tell you; ***but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.***"

I can imagine that the people after hearing this stood with their mouths open, aghast, totally befuddled. Like the guys in the barbershop in the AFLAC commercial when Yogi Berra, singing the praises of his policy ends by saying, "... and they give ya cash which is just as good as money!"

The people had asked serious theological questions, Why do these events happen? Is this God's doing? Why those people? with the deeper questions lurking just beneath the surface, If these people are innocent then God cannot be all-powerful and if they are sinful then God cannot be all good and all loving.

Jesus does not answer their question; he changes the pronoun and the focus. His response shifts the focus from "those" persons and "those" dilemmas/questions to the personal "you." He is turning the question back to each of us; "***unless you repent***" life will be wasted for you as well.

Then he tells a parable that seems, on first blush, so unrelated, about an unproductive fig tree in a vineyard. This tree is most disappointing to the owner because it has never produced any figs. In his anger at having given more than enough time for it to produce orders it to be cut down.

But along comes the gardener who still loves the tree too much to hear of cutting it down just yet. So he pleads for its life and promises to tend and nourish the soil around it. And probably, though not mentioned, there will be careful pruning and tender care of other sorts during the year of grace in hopes to coax out the latent fruit within.

Jesus does not answer the question of the connection between the calamity of natural disaster and human culpability or sinfulness, nor why innocents suffer or why there is human pain. Jesus moves the question inward to the heart of the hearer: Why am I alive? What is my life about?

These kinds of questions come roaring in when frightening events happen.

A fellow retreatant told of a recent text message from his daughter. It came as a response to the sudden and totally unexpected death of one of her classmates, a lively, lovely young man who went to sleep and didn't awake. It scared the students and his daughter in particular. She texted, "Dear mom and dad, I haven't been a very ideal daughter lately but I want to tell you how much I love you." My friend's reply, "I love you too sweetheart. (Signed) From your less than ideal dad."

The call to repentance, whenever it comes, is a call to return to God, an invitation into the life of God into the grace of God's unconditional love to which we must respond or our transformation (the new fruit on the fig tree) will not occur.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg remembers a lecture he attended of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Bp Tutu quoted St. Augustine, "God without us will not, as we without God cannot."

Perhaps this is what is meant by God-the-Gardener as he pleads, "***If it bears fruit next year well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.***"

So, each one of us, like my friend's daughter, might suddenly and unexpectedly be confronted with the meaning of our life. In that instant, as in this season of Lent, we are invited to repent, to turn around and notice again that we live and move and have our being in the stunning grace of God. Now we must respond with our text message in love for God and in service for one another.

Come to the Eucharist and be nourished into the fruitful life of faith.