

*St. John's, Tappahannock, VA  
Third Sunday in Lent  
March 11, 2007*

*"Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"  
The Rev. William T. Pickering*

The lessons for this morning present a particularly direct and seemingly harsh view of the Lord God that is appropriate for Lent, but a bit of a contrast to the loving, forgiving, gracious God that we are more comfortable with.

The great God **I AM** confronts Moses in the Burning Bush and tells him that he is to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt into the land of promise, but we know that both the Egyptians and the people of Israel had some difficulty believing all this, and that, though they did make it to the Land of Milk and Honey, it was not all as easy as it sounded.

While they were on their way to this Promised Land, God called Moses to the Mountain Top and presented him with the 10 Commandments which still don't go over all that well.

The Epistle for this morning strongly implies that if the Law is broken there are some rather significant consequences that can be expected. The indulgence in sexual immorality in particular is going to lead to a great deal of trouble. In fact St. Paul seems to indicate that we are being tested, and that the testing is important for us to resist as a sign to God and to others of our strong faith and commitment.

There is a world view being presented that is very appealing, but one that creates great difficulty. In the world view of the community into which Jesus came, there was a simple and clear cut belief in a system of rewards and punishments that was just and fair.

If bad things happened to you, it was because you had done bad things to deserve them. If it was not immediately obvious what you had done – search your soul and you will find it.

Thus it makes all kinds of sense for Jesus to be asked if some particularly horrible happenings at the time were because the people involved were particularly bad. It seems that Pilate had indulged in some human sacrifice, mixing the blood of Galileans with the blood of sacrifice – did that happen to those Galileans because they were very bad?

Jesus says that it was not because they were so very bad, but then goes on to say that if those who are following him do not clean up their act, they can expect the same thing and worse.

He then goes on to use another example from the news concerning 18 who were killed when a tower fell on them – they were no worse than any others, either, but if his followers did not repent, then they could expect the same.

He then tells a parable about a fig tree that is given one more chance to bear fruit, but if it does not after that one more chance — then cut it down.

Do we believe that there is a system of rewards and punishments that meets out Justice by punishing the unjust with disasters and disease?

My guess is that we wish it were so, but we know that really bad things can happen to everyone – that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous alike, and that folks devastated by tornadoes in the middle of the country are no worse sinners than any of the rest of us.

If only the world operated in this simple and straightforward manner, think how easy my job would have been all these years. Think how full this place would be and how delightfully simple our marketing task would be – if you are a good person and you come to Church and worship the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you follow the commandments – no bad things will happen to you – however, if you choose not to join us and follow the Lord God – well look out, because all sorts of awful things will happen to you.

The good and the bad would be easy to identify – the good would live long and prosper and the bad

– well, you know what happens to them.

The world does not function that way, and we do not think that way.

We see God as loving and gracious and acknowledge his presence in our lives as a support and comfort to get through the things that happen to us rather than the punisher who causes them.

In our more liberal understanding of the nature of the world (please excuse my use of the “L” word) we are even entitled to God’s Grace by our Baptism.

Jesus’ point to his followers is that no one is entitled to be delivered from the bad things that happen. The implied pride in the follower’s assumption that those who had suffered disaster were somehow worse than they were was simply nothing more than that – pride.

There was nothing that the followers had done that made them any less likely to be caught in a disaster, and they were no better than anyone else, no more deserving of special treatment than anyone else.

No, neither the Gentiles who were sacrificed nor those killed by the tower falling on them were any worse than they were. They were no more or less deserving of their fate.

Rather than being the folks who really believe that we are very specially good and deserving – entitled to – very special benefits, we are the people who recognize that we are in the greatest need of redemption.

This is a place where sinners gather to acknowledge their fault and to receive and celebrate the gift of redemption – a gift that comes not as an entitlement, but as a special gift of love from the Redeemer of the world who set us free from the inevitable punishment of the Law.

We really need to get away from the idea that it is the good folks who gather in churches on Sunday mornings. The folks who are in Church are those who recognize that they are sinners in need of redemption and that this world is in a mess and in desperate need of a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Bad things happen to everybody, because no one deserves special attention – the only one who possibly could was crucified.

So when bad things do happen, where do we come for comfort and support and love from fellow sinners who have been loved by God – we come here.

We don’t have some invisible force to protect us but we do have a place to care for one another, to work toward making the world a better place for ourselves and others and to repent and make our lives new.

That is what we have to market to the world and that is what makes us different – thanks be to God.

*Amen.*