

3rd Sunday of Lent

How often we hear of a sudden death, perhaps not through violence as in the examples in today's Gospel, but sudden nonetheless, unexpected. Hopefully, the person struck down so suddenly was well prepared to meet the Lord at the moment when he passed from this world to stand before the judgement seat of God. How important it is to notice how often in the Gospels Jesus pleads with his followers in various ways to be ready at every moment to render an account of their lives before the judgement seat of Christ. For instance, at the conclusion of the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins, Jesus says, "**Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**" (Mt. 25:13) Or in the parable of the unfaithful servant who gives way to debauchery because his Master delays in coming, Jésus says, "**the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful**" (Luke 12:46)

Yet, in spite of these warnings to always be ready to face judgement, Jesus also seems to suggest that many even of his followers will not be ready to render an account of their lives, should the Lord come suddenly, that is, should their lives end suddenly, and the Lord come to judge them. That seems clearly to be the implication of his warnings in today's Gospel. In recounting the two disasters that took lives in Galilee and at the Tower of

Siloam in Jerusalem. The focus is on the suddenness of the two calamities, and twice Jesus warns his followers: ***But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!*** Moreover, the perishing he refers to is not simply physical death, but spiritual death; otherwise, the call to repentance would seem out of place.

Moreover, in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns that there will be those who will arrive at their judgment completely so completely unprepared that they will be blind to their peril, assuming that they will be judged mercifully simply because they have the title of Jesus followers, or simply because they give lip service to His name, But Jesus says something else:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. [Mat 7:22]

Thus Jesus warns that it is not enough to simply honor him with lip service if we are to belong to His Kingdom - we must honor His Person through faith by living lives in obedience to His Father's will. In short, it is pure presumption when someone thinks he can disobey God's will and still be judged worthy to belong to His Kingdom, simply because the person says he recognizes Jesus as Lord. Words have to be proven by deeds, and the way we prove we believe in Jesus and love him is to do what he did – keep the commandments that express the will of His Father.

Indeed, Jesus goes even further in that same chapter of St.

Matthew and says:

Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?" [Mat 7:23] Then I will declare to them solemnly, "I never knew you.<1> Depart from me, you evildoers.'

Note that Jesus does not call them liars or contradict what they say they did, preach, drive out demons and work miracles in his name. However, he declares *solemnly* "**I never knew you.**" In other words, even having the power to preach, or cast out demons or work miracles is not enough to gain heaven, if we do not likewise obey His commandments. Only the one who actually *does* the will of the Father will be one in heaven with the Son, for Jesus saved us not simply by preaching, or exorcising demons or performing miracles, but above all by doing His Father's will, even to the obedience on the Cross. Thus, he warns us that we too must do His father's will to the point of suffering and dying, or we will not, cannot, enter the Final Kingdom, and we will be among those who will hear those terrible words of Jesus: "***I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.***"

This is why Jesus appeals to us, now, at this moment to be ready, to be converted to His Father's will, to repent and be cleansed of sin. This is no idle threat meant simply scare us into repentance. He warns us because He knows the true fate of those who are not ready for judgement, whether their judgement comes unexpectedly or not.

Indeed, the whole Gospel is really a great and heartfelt appeal from Jesus to be converted to the Father and to remain always ready to render the account that will inevitably be required of each of us. St. Paul makes this same point in today's second reading where he reminds us that not all the Israelites entered the Promised Land, even though all were baptized in Moses and all ate the same spiritual food, and that all this was recorded as a warning to us:

These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

Lent is likewise such an appeal to us from God to reform our lives before we are called to depart this world. We should never think we stand secure before God, lest we fall. Lent reminds us that our lives are always in need of reform if we are to stand fast without presumption. We are far from the degree of spiritual perfection necessary to enter Heaven. Moreover, even if we believe we are in the state of Grace, and ready to render an account, there is still much evil that has to be corrected in us, so many imperfections that have to be overcome before we actually enter into God's Heaven, and see God face to face.

To enter Heaven, ultimately means to be united with God in the holiness of His own being. Recall the words of God to Moses in today's first reading: *God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the*

sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” The Israelites stood even farther off. If the ground was made so holy that Moses had to remove his sandals, what imperfections must be removed from us, if we are truly to stand in the holiness of God Himself?

Jesus made it clear, in that very same Sermon on the Mount, (5:48) that before this perfect union with God and God’s beatitude can happen, we must be perfected, he said, as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Of course man can never attain a perfection equal to God’s, but our human nature must be perfected by His Grace, cleansed even of every stain of sin, let alone sin itself, before we can enter God’s presence. Either we undergo His purifying action in this life, through confession and self-discipline and penance in our lives, or we will surely be purified by the spiritual fire of Purgatory. There simply is no other path to Heaven. You cannot be beautiful unless you are clean; you cannot be beatified unless you are pure. So Lent is a great gift to us, a heartfelt appeal from God to purify our hearts and be ready for His coming, whenever that may happen. It is not so much a sign of God’s anger or displeasure with us, but of His love for us. It is simply part of the narrow road that leads to Himself; or better, a cry from the heart of God to be perfected in this world so we can be with Him forever in the next.