

3rd Sunday of Lent – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Mar. 7, 2010)

The parable in today's gospel evokes the **theme of judgment**. A fig tree that a man planted in his vineyard has failed to produce any fruit for three consecutive years. When the owner instructs his gardener to cut it down, he suggests giving it one more chance. "If it bears fruit next year," he says, "well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Twice earlier in the reading, Jesus said to the crowds: "unless you repent, that is, unless you bear the fruit of good and decent lives, you will all perish."

The notion that we will all one day be judged comes back a number of times in the gospels. Such a notion presupposes that we are free and responsible and as such will have to answer for our actions. On some level this is common sense. It is something with which car manufacturers are continually confronted. If some aspect of their products is defective, does not work the way it is supposed to, causes accidents, they have to take responsibility, correct the fault, pay the damages.

What is true of them is true of almost all aspects and of every walk of life. We are **responsible for what we do**, what we make, how we present ourselves in the world. If this applies to us as workers, administrators, creators, it should not be surprising that it also applies to us in our basic humanity. Nothing we do escapes the realm of responsibility, certainly not the actions and attitudes that gradually over time mold us into the kind of people that we are.

In today's **second reading**, Paul writes to the relatively young Christian community in Corinth. Although some of its members are puffed up about their spiritual superiority, their community life is anything but ideal. It is torn by division and jealousies and quarreling. The culturally sophisticated are looking down on those whom they judge to be their inferiors. The well to do, for their part, are abusing the poor by refusing to allow them to sit at the same table with them at the meal which at that time accompanied the eucharist.

In our reading, Paul draws on the experience of the Israelites on their journey from Sinai to

the promised land to give a warning to the Corinthians. Although the whole people were beneficiaries of God's liberating activity in the exodus, many ended by turning away from him and, as a result, died in the wilderness. So it will be, Paul suggests, with those Christians who refuse to mend their ways. Although all have been baptized in Christ and all participate in the eucharist, not all are living up to their baptismal commitments. What happened to Israel, Paul says, was written for our instruction; it offers us an example. "If you think that you are standing," he says, "watch out that you do not fall."

None of us is perfect. We all fail in a variety of ways. Some of our failures are serious and have major repercussions for ourselves and for our families. Others are less so, but they too can undermine the good that we might otherwise do. We can all, in other words, improve, grow, become more authentically the kind of person that God calls us to be.

As important as the **theme of judgment** is, it is inseparable from, and only really takes on its true meaning in relation to, all that the Bible teaches about the nature of God and of God's relationship to us.

Today's first reading describes a key moment in the life of Moses and of Israel. In calling Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, God reveals himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." He is a God of people, a God who intervenes in human life, and who calls individuals into relationship with him. In response to a request of Moses, God reveals to him his name. In fact he gives three forms of it. "**I am who I am**" he says, and then, more simply, "**I am**". Using the same verb but putting it into the third person, he declares his name to be "the one who is," in Hebrew, **Yahweh**. For Israel, this became the name of God, a name so precious and holy, that people avoided pronouncing it. Whenever they came across it in the Bible, the substituted for it another Hebrew word, **Adonai, the Lord**.

I have always thought of the name of the biblical God as containing a promise, a promise of presence. God not only is, he is with us, he goes before us on our journey through life. Today's psalm fills out the somewhat abstract language of the divine name when it declares: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love."

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is described as "God with us." At the end of the same Gospel, the risen Christ, in sending out the apostles to proclaim the good news, promises to be with them always until the end of the age.

The reason why we have the courage to look at and admit our failings and to try to overcome them, is the sense we have that God is with us. In our struggles we are not alone. Not only do we have the example of those who have gone before us and of so many who are still among us, we also have in us, in the form of the Spirit of the risen Christ, an abiding source of life and strength. It is for this reason that we can be confident that, in spite of every difficulty, we will bear the fruit of a life worthy of our vocation as children of God and sisters and brothers of Christ.