

### **Third Sunday of Lent**

The liturgy of the Third Sunday of Lent begins by acknowledging God's holiness and his claim on us that we belong to him. It recognizes that we are his own people and must live in a way that reflects his holiness. God offers us the gift of faith as our path towards holiness. At the same time, we all want and desire to live a peaceful life. We all want to make sense of our existence. We all desire to live a life where we can make a positive contribution to ourselves, to our families and to those around us. Challenges are always with us, difficulties surround us. However, the more we long, desire and develop a personal and ultimate relationship with Jesus Christ as our best friend, there is absolutely nothing that we cannot face and overcome. Indeed, we become the "power and the wisdom of God". In this season of Lent, we prepare for the feast of Easter by trying to purify our body and spirit in order to abundantly receive the fruits of the Redemption of the Lord. Today the church invites us to reflect on the urgency of repentance in an attempt to enhance our Christian lives.

During this time of Lent, there is an invitation to examine our lives and change for the better through a process of repentance and the need for the transformation of the heart. One of the recurrent themes throughout the Lenten season is the compassion and mercy of our God. It is something that we constantly need to be reminded about. Repentance entails the recognition of areas of unfaithfulness in our lives and the readiness to make reparations. Repentance demands that we become honest with ourselves and recognize our unfruitfulness. Once we have accepted this change in our lives God has a ready mission for us. He wants us to fulfil his task on earth namely to proclaim the kingdom of God. In the parable in the Gospel of today, Jesus speaks of the tree which is alive, but it does not fulfill its duty of bearing fruit.

The Gospel Reading mentions the parable of Jesus namely the unproductive fig tree which stresses God's divine patience and forbearance. This parable immediately follows after Jesus explained that sin is offensive to God, that it deserves severe punishment. Sin is understood as missing the mark and negation of God's presence. In the parable that Jesus told, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. When the man went to look at it for fruit, he found none on it. The tree had now been without fruit for three consecutive years. Finally, tired of that useless tree, the man told the gardener to cut it down. Upon hearing this, the gardener asked the owner to patiently wait another year during which time he would dig around the tree and put manure on it in the hope that it would bear fruit. If that helps after one year and there are fruits on it, good; if not, then it should be cut down. The fig tree was a favorite tree of the Jews. It was a tree of peace where a happy Jew sat for his regular prayers. Here is the fig tree that had taken so much nourishment from the soil.

In the parable, the master had already waited for three years, and the gardener asks for another year where it would receive extra care. Here Jesus is issuing a warning to all of us that now is the time to repent and to change. No one knows when God will call us to ultimate

accountability. The fig tree reminds us of two kinds of human people, those who give and those who take. Those who give symbolize the sacrifice they make and fulfil the purpose of their existence. They give what they have without holding back anything for themselves and this is in generosity. Those who only take have to justify their existence. They have to fulfil their purpose of existence. To accept Christ's message is to be open for conversion and change of heart. It invites the person to bear fruit and fulfil the purpose for which it has been created, namely, to give. Repentance or Conversion means to respond to God's care for us, to devote ourselves to a life of vigilance day in and day out and constantly renew our cooperation with God's grace.

The parable of the useless fig tree while it applies directly to the stubborn Jews of Christ's time has a lesson for all times and for all sinners. God's mercy is infinite but man's earthly life, during which he can obtain the divine mercy, is very finite. God's mercy can forgive sins no matter how grievous, but it cannot forgive even less serious sins unless the sinner is sorry and asks for forgiveness. Christ, the high priest who is the mediator between God and man, is continually interceding for us but unless we do our part of repenting and changing our behavior, his intercession will be of no avail to us. God does not want anyone to be destroyed but he always respects our freedom and humility to repent. He calls us to be vigilant and alert to listen to him and respond to him. The gardener in the parable is Jesus himself who pleads for us continuously.

During this season of Lent, we ask for the grace to live in a continual spirit of renewal and repentance. Repentance demands that we become honest to ourselves and recognize our unfruitfulness and change ourselves to bear the right fruit for God. Moses was asked to change his view and do his mission. Each fig tree is expected to bear fruit that represents the good works and virtues of those who help to build the Body of Christ. Each must answer his calling according to where he has been sent by God. The fig tree is called upon to be generous in the fulfilment of the mission. We must recognize our nothingness before God and be ready to receive him during this season of Lent.