

## Lenten Homilies for Year C (Part 1)

(The Gospels for the first two Sundays of Lent give one or other of the accounts from the Synoptic Gospels of the Temptations of Jesus, and the Transfiguration. Then each of the cycle of readings goes its own way. In Year C we have a unique passage from St Luke's Gospel that refers to a couple of (presumably) historical incidents which his readers already knew about.

Quite often these homilies refer only to the Gospel. I regularly give a two or three line (but no more than that) introduction to the other readings as the Readers are coming up to the Lectern, to help set the readings in the context, both of their own day, and how they fit with the theme of the day.)

### First Sunday of Lent 2004

I was struck earlier in the week by the modesty of a young soldier who received the George Cross for his bravery in trying to rescue his comrades from a tank in Iraq. Whatever we might think of the Iraq War there is no doubting the bravery of a young lad who under heavy bombardment manages to rescue other men from a blazing tank, radioing for help and going back to try to rescue another comrade. It just sounds rather childish that he could not be awarded the Victoria Cross because it was a friendly-fire incident and not under enemy fire.

In generation after generation politicians ask young men and women to put their lives at risk in the name of all kinds of things – justified and not justified. They just do their job – which is what this young soldier apparently said to reporters, *"I was just doing my job like anyone else would have done."* True heroism, although quite extraordinary is in fact rooted in the ordinary, the day-to-day of getting on with life.

In a fantasy world heroism is always spectacular, magical, coming out of nowhere. It is colourful and exciting. In a fantasy world Jesus **would** have turned the stones into bread – satisfying his immediate needs by using extraordinary magical powers. In a fantasy world he **would** have done some spectacular tricks, defying gravity swooshing around all over the place. In a fantasy world he **would** have tried **anything** – good, bad, right, wrong to have made some of success. But, just like ourselves, Jesus lived in the **real** world.

For any **truly** human person the options offered in that Gospel are pure fantasy; and while there are times in our life when we would all clearly love access to that fantasy world – to get us out of a fix, to solve problems at a stroke rather than painfully having to work them through - there is no such world. In resisting the temptations put before him, Jesus is accepting the reality of life in this world, the reality of our ordinary existence. *"One like us in all things but sin."*

However ordinary our life may be, the extraordinary is not far away. It wasn't for that young soldier going about his work in Iraq last year. It isn't far away for people just going about their lives in the most ordinary routine – of home and family life, of life at work and so on – because this is where we are called upon to journey in faith and because in everything God is present to us. The extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary.

In resisting the temptation to kop out, to find the easy and painless way out of whatever Jesus had to face, he shows solidarity with our own situation. Like him we rely on faith in God, not in some magical powers. Living by faith in the day-to-day stuff of life is true heroism.

The point of our Lenten disciplines of prayer, almsgiving and fasting is to strengthen that faith, the better able to celebrate its foundation in the events of Holy Week.

## First Sunday of Lent 2013

Those are rather chilling words at the end of that Gospel Passage, “...the devil left him, to return at the appointed time.” The ‘appointed time’ is presumably in the Garden of Gethsemane in the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper and just before his arrest – the temptation possibly to flee from the fate that now awaits him. As we know, of course, Jesus did not take flight but faced his fate.

In fact these temptations at the beginning of his ministry follow along much the same lines. They are not really temptations to commit sin as we imagine temptation to be about. They are, instead, temptations to make his whole ministry as easy and effortless as possible.

So, refusing to change stones into bread is a refusal to make himself and his own needs the central focus of his ministry.

Refusing to kneel at Satan’s feet and in return receive complete power over all the Kingdom of the world is a refusal to do things in Satan’s way – using power, domination and exploitation. Jesus’ ministry **will** be based on authority but not on wanton, indiscriminate power, trampling over people’s basic human rights.

And in refusing to make a dramatic and spectacular jump off the parapet of the Temple to be rescued by the angels, Jesus points to the fact that his ministry will be about quietly addressing the basic needs and aspirations of people without showmanship and apparent displays of magic.

As we know these are precisely the ways in which Jesus **does** go about his ministry – his prayer, his preaching and his reaching out to others in their need.

As with Jesus’ ministry, so it should be with the Church today – the way in which all people in the Church are called upon to be true disciples – apprentices of the Master.

This brings me to two points:

The first, in connection with the forthcoming resignation of Pope Benedict, is to pray for the cardinals who will have the responsibility of choosing the next Bishop of Rome – that these values of Jesus’ own ministry will be at the forefront of their deliberations – one who to choose.

The second matter, is in connection with goals, the purposes of our Lenten disciplines (notice ‘discipline’ and ‘disciple’ – the connections) of prayer, fasting and reaching out to others in their need. One of the purposes is to prepare ourselves to celebrate worthily Jesus’ Passion, Death and Resurrection in a few weeks’ time. Another purpose is to help us to discern how we can be more actively involved in discipleship. In this connection there is a great need – here at St. Bede’s, but also at our other churches here in Washington, for people to come forward and to step up to the plate (opening the church and setting things up for Mass on a Saturday Evening or Sunday morning, or a week day – an hour or so of your time). Or perhaps being involved in Children’s Liturgy one hour or so once every few weeks. There are many areas of parish life which could do with the help of fresh blood.

## First Sunday of Lent 2016

During this last week I went to the cinema to see the film “Spotlight”. It tells the story of the Spotlight team of investigative journalists at the Boston Globe newspaper as they uncover the clergy abuse scandal in Boston in 2001. It is not an easy film to watch and no-one comes out of it smelling of roses. In fact the story is not sensationalised in any way, and it seems that it is a contender for the Oscar for Best Film, and in many ways it would deserve the honour.

Naturally the Church is the prime culprit, or at least high officials in the church in Boston who had for decades been covering up abuse of children by priests – moving offenders on from parish to parish, thinking

that a course of treatment would “cure” the problem. They used lawyers to help silence the parents of victims with pitifully small cash ‘settlements’. Politicians and the Police were complicit also. Even the Press does not come out of it well. At the end of the film we find out that the leader of the Spotlight Team was himself given information by a lawyer involved in these cases eight or nine years before the story finally broke, but he had no recollection at all of receiving such an important piece of information. No-one comes out the story well and, as we are aware, the extent of the scandal has mushroomed across America and the world since 2002 when the Boston stories were first published.

People in the Church, especially the clergy of whatever title and rank ought to have known better, but we didn’t. It seems that somehow there was a prevailing culture in which “the normal rules don’t apply to us”. It can be called “clergy exceptionalism” – everybody is bound by certain rules of conduct and behaviour, but not the clergy. It is difficult to comprehend how such a ridiculous idea could ever be thought to be acceptable, and yet it was.

Amongst other things such wrong thinking is a direct contradiction of our Gospel today which is, as always on this First Sunday of Lent, one of the accounts of Jesus’ temptations in the desert. If anyone could have justifiably thought that “the normal rules don’t apply”, that he was above and beyond the conventions of human behaviour, it should have been Jesus, and yet from this incident, and throughout his ministry, we see that Jesus never takes that path.

In the first temptation he is invited to perform a miracle to satisfy his own need. He will perform a miracle with a few loaves and fishes later on, but that would be to satisfy the needs of others, not his own. Power, especially power in the Church must never be used for self. Jesus rejects power further in the second of the temptations when he spurns the idea of imposing his will on others. The Gospel message is to be offered to, never imposed on, others against their will. Nor is the message to be accompanied by spectacular displays of magic – the third temptation. In all of this Jesus refuses to take the path of least resistance, the easy way out of anything. This will, of course, go as far as undergoing suffering and death. His message is a tough one of love without exception, and that is what we, his followers, his disciples are called to as well.

We have begun the great Season of Lent in which we prepare to celebrate Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. We are called to realise that the way Jesus took is the same for all of us, without exception. Our three Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving - spending time each day in prayer, being disciplined in what we eat and drink, and reaching out to others in their need – are the core ways in which we remind ourselves of this fact, and which help us to live this out. They are offered to us as a means of growing closer to Jesus’ way of living and preaching the Gospel, and therefore help to avoid any suggestion that we are in any way above and beyond any accepted social norms. Jesus was not, so why would we think that we are somehow different? No, we are all called to the same thing.

### **First Sunday in Lent 2019**

Notice that none of those three temptations faced by Jesus has anything to do with immoral behaviour. There is nothing about the usual things that we associate with immorality such as lying, stealing, cheating, bad-mouthing, deliberately injuring another, nothing to do with the perennial association of sex with immorality!

Immoral behaviour is about breaking an agreed moral code of behaviour. What we have in this Gospel is not a struggle with immorality. It is far, far more serious than that. The struggle here is with AMORALITY – a situation in which there is no moral code at all, where the only thing that counts is power, raw power. This is what the Devil is putting before Jesus. By using power Jesus could short-circuit all the messiness, all the setbacks, the pain and the struggles that he will have to face in his Public Ministry, and “Hey, presto!” everything works out.

Except, of course, that it does not. Nothing actually works that way in life, in the end.

I recently succumbed to the temptation of subscription tv. Up till then I had been satisfied with Free to View channels. I now have a monthly subscription to Netflix. Among other things this has let me watch a series made only for this franchise that began a few years ago: House of Cards. It is a completely (I hope) fictional tale about politics in America. The two main characters who will do anything to gain and then remain in power are akin to some of the Roman Emperors and their wives (Augustus and Livia), or totalitarian rulers in the last (and this) century (Chairman Mao and Mrs Mao, or Robert Mugabe and his wife). Lies are nothing, murder, assassination, sending young people in the army to their deaths in war purely to prop up their own power: they will stop at nothing. I find it at the same time compelling viewing and terrifying. I feel as though I need to have a good shower to clean up after watching some of the episodes, such is the evil portrayed there. Even the Presidency of the U.S. is not sufficient in the end for the main character, because it is time-limited to a maximum of 8 years.

Power utterly consumes the person in its thrall. We can truly talk here about “possession”. Power has the ability to possess, to take over and to reduce to nothing any commonly agreed moral code. The very idea of a moral code by which such people ought to abide is just ridiculous to them. This, as you can see, goes much deeper than telling lies or using bad language.

It is power and its terrible consequences that lie at the root of the Abuse Crisis in our Church. The fact that clergy who are supposed to support the vulnerable, to preach Jesus’ message of hope and mercy, chose instead to abuse their power over others in a way that destroyed lives is almost beyond belief. It will take quite some change in fundamental attitude to clerical power to redeem the situation, but hopefully after a very rude awakening in the last few months and years there will be some light at then end of this very dark time for our church.

In that Gospel Jesus refuses to succumb to the temptation to use power over others. His will be a difficult path, but it will be one in which he is truly free: free to do that which is right, and ultimately it is that will prevail. Here we arrive at the heart and soul of what our Lenten observance is all about. Being people of prayer, being people who are self-disciplined in our lives, being people who have the good of others – especially the most vulnerable in society – all of this, coming about through our Lenten disciplines, will set us on the path to true freedom.

Of course all of us do indeed fall short of what we are called to be, in some way or other and in that sense everyone is called to repentance, to change our ways. Choosing to follow in Jesus’ footsteps is not easy, but it is what leads to true freedom and, above all, to the triumph of life over death in the Resurrection.

## **Second Sunday of Lent 2004**

To use a very modern expression I think it would be fair to say that at the time of this incident in today’s Gospel the disciples were on a very confusing emotional roller-coaster. In the space of a week, as we can glean from the Gospels, they had witnessed the miracle of the loaves and the fishes – 5,000 people fed and ready to whisk Jesus off to make him King – until he explains his message further to them. Then the crowds dwindle away, and even some of the disciples who had been with Jesus from the beginning drift off.

Jesus then asked them, *“Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am?”* And Peter had made his great profession of faith *“You are the Christ, the Messiah.”* Then Jesus had told them not only must the Christ suffer and die to rise again, but any follower of his, any disciple, had to take up her/his own cross and follow him. A bewildering roller-coaster of events. What to do? Who is this person?

Then the three central disciples Peter, James and John are alone with Jesus when the events described in today’s Gospel take place – events we are told that they didn’t talk about with anyone else at the time. Jesus, their Master, appearing different, talking with the representatives of the Old Testament – Moses and Elijah – the Law and the Prophets. Being afraid, not sure what to say – then the Cloud and the voice, *“This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him.”*

In different groups in this last week reflecting on this Gospel, people have seen in this an encouragement to Peter, James and John to stick with this bewildering Master of theirs through the ups and downs. This encouragement is offered to us still in the early stages of our Lenten journey – our own preparation to celebrate Jesus' Death and Resurrection. And, at times perhaps, equally bewildered as to what to do, who to follow, how to live out my life in faith, a life of faith lived out in the midst of a bewildering array of other ways to live, other values to follow, other gods to worship.

In the time of Jesus and his disciples the Jewish people were unique in worshipping the one God. Greeks and Romans had an array of gods for different needs and occasions and took on board the gods worshipped in each of the places they occupied. They were superstitious about offending any god that they did not yet know about – so they had a tendency to worship them all.

Because we belong to a supposedly sophisticated, high-tech society, superstitions, worshipping different gods can look very primitive, something very alien to us. But perhaps what is, in fact, going on in our own age is denial – denial of worshipping anything at all – and in our denial succumbing more and more to worshipping false gods, false ways to apparent happiness and fulfilment in life.

No-one today would admit to worshipping Aphrodite/Venus – the goddess of beauty – but beauty salons, health clubs and tanning salons, adverts for designer clothes and so on are everywhere. No-one today would admit to worshipping Ares/Mars – the god of war, but listen to the language used to describe football matches/rugby matches and so on – contests, battles and so on. No-one these days would make *"foods into their gods"* as St. Paul talks about in our Second Reading. No-one these days will say they worship Dionysius/Bacchus – the God of wine. No, we just have partying, clubbing, fast foods and then a whole array of slimming clubs and detox-diets. We are faced with bewildering choices – offering all kinds of fulfilment or a temporary fix to blot out disillusionment.

Lent is a time in which we remind ourselves of the one choice that will bring us satisfaction and fulfilment. Reminded one again, *"This is my Son, The Chosen One. Listen to him"* and we are encouraged to keep going on this faith journey of ours.

## **Second Sunday of Lent 2007**

In the last couple of weeks before Lent started, at Mass on weekdays our First Readings came from the First 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis – the same Book as in our First Reading today. The stories in those early chapters paint a wonderful picture of humankind created by a loving God but then rejecting that same God in so many different ways – by eating forbidden fruit, by one brother murdering another, by a general sinfulness at the time of the Flood, and by trying to build the Tower of Babel and climb into heaven to take over from God.

They are not scientific accounts of how human life evolved – they are not meant to be. They do however give some wonderful insights into how human beings are alienated from God's original loving plan – and they form the backdrop of the whole of the rest of the Bible, which is the story of how God restores the loving relationship between us and God. It begins in that story of the Covenant with Abram, *"Your descendants will be as many as the stars of heaven. Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified."* We are the descendants of Abram sharing that original faith – faith brought to its completion in Jesus Christ – a completion which reaches a critical state in today's Gospel.

It is no coincidence that the two figures of Moses and Elijah are talking to Jesus about *"his passing which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem."* Another word for *"passing"* is *"Exodus"* – Israel's move from slavery in Egypt to freedom. Jesus' exodus accomplished in Jerusalem will be the freedom of all humankind from the slavery to sin. Here will be the restoration of God's loving relationship with his Creation – as it was meant to be in the Book of Genesis.

It is a moment of glory, a moment of special insight into what God is to accomplish in Jesus, and no wonder Peter wants to stay in this moment of glory – build three tents, a monument to the occasion. But God doesn't want monuments. Peter, like the rest of us, wants the glory, the happiness, the triumph, but without the pain and difficulty that come first. But this is not how human life works and the message is *"Yes, this is my Son, the Chosen One. LISTEN TO HIM."*

"Listen and learn and you will find true glory and happiness, but you cannot remain on this mountain aloof and away from everything. You too must go up to Jerusalem for this passing, this exodus. This is how I plan to restore creation to myself, to make descendants for Abram in faith."

Every year we have one of the accounts of the Transfiguration read to us on the Second Sunday of Lent. We have begun our preparations to celebrate once again the core events of our faith in Holy Week – and we are reminded that this is how it was meant to be. Glory and resurrection **will come** but not by bypassing the first bit of what going to Jerusalem was about for Jesus – to suffer, to die and so be brought to the glory of the Resurrection – and so to bring us from slavery to sin, to freedom.

### **Second Sunday of Lent 2010**

I feel sure that I have mentioned before that one of the nicer features of driving around the connecting roads here in Washington are the trees that line each side of the road. At the same time one of the great problems of driving along these connecting roads are the trees that line each side of the road. There are no distinguishing landmarks from which to get your bearings.

In the midst of busy, busy lives as we hurry from one thing to the next, trying to balance out the various demands on our time of job, family and friends, it is often difficult to get our bearings – to see in which direction I'm heading, what my goal might be.

At heart I think this rather strange story of the Transfiguration is about getting our bearings. We always have one or other version of this story from the Gospel of Matthew, Mark or Luke on this Second Sunday of Lent. This is a Season in the Church's Year that is about getting bearings – looking at our lives from a different perspective – seeing how we are doing and re-committing ourselves to the one true goal in life – our union with God.

As the story unfolds in St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus is now at the end of his Public Ministry in Galilee. He is about to begin the journey up to Jerusalem where what is now almost inevitable will unfold – *"his passing"* as it is called here. Just before leaving Galilee, together with the inner core group of disciples, Peter, James and John, he climbs up the mountain to pray – to get his bearings, to get some perspective in the hectic life he has been leading, and to see the road ahead more clearly.

From Mount Tabor – the traditional site of the Transfiguration – there is a wonderful view over Galilee. On one side Nazareth and Cana, on another side Capernaum which has been Jesus' base for much of his ministry. If you turn and put these places at your back in front of you is the great Plain of Jezreel and in the distance the foothills of Judaea, in the middle of which lies Jerusalem.

Jesus must now take this road to Jerusalem and he is confirmed in his faith in conversation with Moses and Elijah – symbolising the Law and the Prophets (what we would call the Old Testament), and the voice of the Father addressing the disciples. Although understandably afraid of what was happening and keeping quiet about it until after Jesus' Death and Resurrection – they too will finally see the significance of this event and will share it with the other disciples, so that it could be shared with all generations' disciples including our own.

Getting some perspective, getting our bearings, being confirmed in our faith – this is what our observance of Lent is all about. Taking opportunities to step back from all our busy-ness and hurrying about to see once again what is truly important in our lives and how best to live this out.

In reflecting this way during Lent we will then be properly prepared to celebrate the events of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection, and to be able to renew our baptismal vows when we come to celebrate Easter.

### Second Sunday of Lent 2013

I want to suggest that in Lent what we are invited to engage in is a bit like one of those 'Join-the-Dots' Exercises in a Puzzle Book. I mean this in two ways.

In the first instance, during Lent we are invited to join up the dots in our own lives. Our Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and works of mercy help us to realise that instead of being isolated and separate parts of our life – one part being what we are in church, another being who we are at home, another who we are at work, and yet another who we are when out with friends – instead of that everything is of one piece and just as a familiar figure appears as we join up the dots in a puzzle, so hopefully, a familiar image of picture will emerge of who we are across all aspects of our life. In doing this it is important to realise that God loves who we actually are – without reservation, no holding back. And so, if there are aspects of our life which do not come up to scratch in our following of Jesus' way, then in the undeserved love of God for us we can address these issues and change into the full person we are called to be.

Joining up the Dots of our compartmentalised lives brings me to a second 'Joining-up' exercise, and this one is about joining up all the bits of Jesus' life and ministry – indeed it could be about joining up all the bits that go together to make the story of the Bible.

Over the cycle of Sunday Readings of three years, we are given a rich variety of readings from every part of the Bible, and especially of course of the Gospels. At the same time, if we are not very careful because we only get short snippets at a time, we might end up seeing only the dots instead of seeing the picture which emerges when the dots are joined up. One piece of Jesus' life is connected to, and fits in with, all other pieces – and there are similar connections which can be made across the whole Bible.

Just to take two examples from the Readings for this Sunday:-

The figure of Abraham in our First Reading is not just the father of the whole Jewish people as we hear in that passage. He is also the model of all believers – a model of faith. *"Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified."* St. Paul will use this example, in fact these very words, when writing his letter to the Romans to bring home to us the need to trust/believe above simply doing and thereby thinking that God owes us a reward for doing good.

The second example is in the Gospel, and in our English translation it is put in a way in which we could easily miss the point. We hear that Elijah and Moses were conversing with Jesus, *"They were speaking of his passing which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem."* The original word in the text for "passing" is "Exodus". – *"They were speaking of his Exodus which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem."* St. Luke is being very pointed in saying this: - the events of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection in Jerusalem are as central/as foundational for Christians as the Exodus is for the Jewish People. Both are about freedom from slavery – the first physical slavery in Egypt, the second our slavery to sin. These things are connected.

Just one thought to finish – one way of helping to join up the dots of Jesus' life might be to take St. Luke's Gospel and read a chapter every day.

## **Second Sunday of Lent 2016**

At the beginning of a funeral homily that I heard during the week Dermott Donnelly, the Parish Priest at the Cathedral, gave a quotation from Mark Twain. Twain apparently wrote, “The two most important days in life are the day you are born, and the day you come to understand why.” I think that that is a fantastic quote which goes to the very heart of who the human person is. In the whole of creation we are the only beings who have to answer that question for ourselves. For every other being it is a given, but we have the capacity – and the task – of finding out why, of making some kind of meaning out of life.

We can only achieve that by using our ability to reflect on experience – to look back and to try to make sense of it all. As Christians we are people who believe that that meaning, that answer to the question why, can only be answered in the light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. This is the reason why, in the whole of the Bible, the four Gospels hold a preeminent place for us. It is one of the reasons why in our liturgy we stand for the reading of the Gospel. Standing is a sign of particular respect for someone, here the presence of Jesus in the words of the Gospel. These Gospels, and what they reveal to us, help us to make sense of life in a unique way.

In this we can see how we are precisely like the three apostles in our Gospel today. Notice that, “they kept silence and, at the time, told no one what they had seen.” It took quite some time for them to understand what this strange incident was all about, and no wonder because it is very strange indeed.

We are told that during this whole episode they were variously, “heavy with sleep”, “did not know what they were saying”, as well as being “afraid”. No wonder it was only after Jesus’ death and resurrection that they were able to talk to others about what had happened. It took that time to process it all.

They see Jesus talking to the two main representatives of the old covenant, the Old Testament. Moses represents the Law, while Elijah represents the prophets – the two main sections of the Jewish Scriptures. So it becomes clear that he is neither one of these. In fact he is above and beyond both, just as the voice from the cloud points out, “This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him.” Only by doing that will they eventually come to understand why this person they are following is so important.

We are in exactly the same boat as those three apostles. To understand our life, to understand our faith we too have to “listen to him”. This we achieve by spending time with these gospel readings, indeed all three readings, not just here and now but at other times during the week. It is why each week we make available the Mass Sheets with today’s readings on one side, and next Sunday’s Gospel on the other – to help in this process of understanding our faith and our life.

Prayer is one of our three Lenten disciplines, and there is no more important form of prayer than praying the Gospels.

## **Third Sunday of Lent 2004**

I hope people don’t misunderstand me when I say that I think we can understand today’s Gospel better, and especially its context, in the wake of Thursday’s bombings in Madrid. Once again we are faced with senseless slaughter of innocent people so that the name of Madrid can be added to those of Bali, New York, Omagh, Lockerbie and countless others. It is natural to look around for perpetrators – ETA, Al Qaeda, Provisional IRA, Libya and so on. The search for rooting out the evil in men and women in terrorist organisations is essential, but it cannot be done if, at the same time, we choose to ignore or deny the evil that also lurks inside each one of us – an evil that may well manifest itself in much less harmful and criminal ways than bombing innocent people – but it is evil nonetheless.

I think that this is the point that Jesus is trying to make in that Gospel. We don’t know anything about the incidents he mentions here. It sounds as though some Galilean freedom fighters (no doubt terrorists in the eyes of the Romans) had been put to death by Pilate for their actions, and people were speculating about what it was that

made them greater sinners than other Galileans that God would allow them to be captured and punished – as opposed to others. They were no different to anyone else – Jesus is saying.

Again there must have been some tragic accident in which several workers had been killed when a tower collapsed on them. What had they done wrong, more than anyone else? – was the idle speculation going on. Nothing, was Jesus' response. They were no different from anyone else.

Accidents, tragedies, terrorist bombings are indiscriminate of innocence and guilt. They can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time – but rather than engage in idle speculation about the evil that lies in others, we need to look inside ourselves and repent of the evil we find there. *“Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did”.*

This is Jesus trying to give these people a wake-up call, just as St. Paul is doing in our Second Reading to the people in Corinth –

*“The man who thinks he is safe must be careful that he does not fall.”*

Of course we pray with and for the people of Madrid and Spain this weekend – for the bereaved, the injured, doctors, nurses and rescue workers. We pray that their General Election may pass off without further violence. We pray for an end to violence, and that those who commit violence may be brought to justice and have a change of heart and mind. But we do not lose sight of our own need of conversion – for the removal of any evil that lies within ourselves.

That is the focus both of our readings this weekend and the fact that now we are almost half way through our Lenten preparations.

### **Third Sunday of Lent 2007 (A)**

I wonder if you ever had the experience, as a youngster, of asking a question in an R.E. lesson, *“But why? But how can?”* and getting the response, *“It’s a mystery!”* That was usually a thinly disguised code for, *“Be quiet and don’t ask such awkward questions. Just accept what I’m saying.”* A mystery was a no-go area, something to be kept at arm’s length and accepted in obedient silence. In some ways it was an attitude based on that incident of the Burning Bush in our First Reading which, at one level, is about keeping your distance. But there is another, more productive, way of looking at what happens.

Moses is already in God’s presence as he marvels at this burning bush and wants to know more about it. As he approached he is not told to shut up or go away, but to maintain a respectful distance, and to honour the fact that he is on holy ground – not *“Go away, get off this ground”* but *“Be respectful, be careful, there is something very precious, very important going on here.”* This, I think, is the proper attitude to mystery. We are part of the mystery already, involved in it, and as we are involved in it, we are invited to keep a respectful distance, honour it, realise that we are on holy ground to tread carefully.

So, in the mystery of life itself when we see bad things happen to good and innocent people we are sometimes moved to ask, *“Why them? Why did that happen to them?”* This is the question that some people bring to Jesus in today’s Gospel. For them the question arises because of an example of what is usually called *“Moral Evil”* – evil where a human agent is involved – a suicide bomber, a deranged murderer, or a vicious ruler like Pilate putting to death some people offering sacrifice in the Temple. *“What did they do to deserve this?”*

For his part Jesus adds a second kind of evil that is often called *“physical evil”* where no human agent is to blame – a natural disaster, a tsunami, an earthquake, a badly constructed tower falling on innocent bystanders.

Whatever kind of evil it is the effect is much the same for the victims – death, injury and suffering. Jesus does not offer a quick and ready answer as to why these people have suffered, even less as to why God should allow these things to happen. But nor does he tell these people to be quiet and not ask such awkward questions.

In dealing with the mystery of life and the questions which life throws up, we are on holy ground. We are already involved, caught up in and part of what is going on (sometimes causing evil ourselves because we are part of it). We

are invited to be duly respectful and wary as we tread on this ground – respectful of the whole of life. Amazed at the fact that our God is the only God about whom people believe was caught up so much in the mystery of life, that God became part of that life – taking on human flesh in the person of his Son. Our God, in Jesus, is involved in life up to and including death. In Jesus God shows us a way to make sense of this life.

And today as Jesus says, “unless you repent you will all perish as they did”, he states the urgency of our responding to this Lenten season to be ready to celebrate the life and the love of our Father in Holy Week.

### Third Sunday of Lent 2010

I just want to focus for a moment on the response we made at the end of each verse of our Psalm today, “*The Lord is compassion and love.*” Throughout the Scriptures the most common words associated with God are “*compassion*”, love, patience, forgiveness, grace and the most frequent greeting God, or God’s messenger, gives on meeting someone, “*Do not be afraid*”. For sure there is a need on our part for respect, for honour and worship – as we see in our First Reading.

Moses is in the presence of someone very special as manifested in the Burning Bush. He must take off his shoes – a sign of respect in that culture and a realization that he is on holy ground. **But** God has allowed him to come close and wants to converse with him. God wants Moses to give the People of Israel a message of hope and salvation.

Down through the centuries God offers this message that demands respect, honour and worship but which is about not being afraid to approach a God full of love, and compassion, and patience, and forgiveness, and grace. This is in complete contrast to the fearful and vengeful image of God – or the gods – in most religions. Gods who meter out punishment either on a whim, or at least as a vengeful punishment for wrongdoing. This is not the God of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures who is revealed in fullness in Jesus who, in God’s great compassion and love comes to save sinners like ourselves.

Even today there are people – people who purport to preach the Christian message – whose image of God is as a vengeful tyrant. There was a dreadful example a few weeks ago given by one of those American Televangelists who said that the earthquake in Haiti happened because of the sinfulness of the Haitian people. To be fair there are examples of such terrible things preached at times in every Christian denomination – sadly!

No, the earthquake in Haiti (and the one in Chile) happened because of the laws of physics. Just as the Galileans mentioned in the Gospel by Jesus died not because they were more sinful than anyone else, but because Pontius Pilate was a bloodthirsty tyrant. Just as the people who were killed by the crumbling tower at Siloam were killed because of shoddy workmanship, or short-cuts or cut-backs in building maintenance, not because they were particularly sinful.

Bad things happen to good people because of the laws of physics, because of bloodthirsty tyrants, because of shoddy workmanship, because of greed when people build hotel, after leisure complex, after hotel and destroy natural drainage patterns. Most of those who die because of these things are innocent of the causes, but, yes, like all of us, they were sinners and like all of us, stand in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Today’s Gospel is given us at this time of Lent, not as scaremongering, but as a sober reminder that the end can come suddenly and without warning, so we need always to be prepared. To be prepared to meet this God of ours who, like the owner of the vineyard at the end of today’s Gospel is patient – and as revealed throughout our Scriptures is full of compassion, love and forgiveness.

### Third Sunday of Lent 2013

Many people will be aware of a now famous Chinese curse which goes, “*May you live in interesting times!*” “*Interesting*” being a euphemism for turbulent and challenging times. Well, we certainly have that in spades wherever we look at the moment.

In the country at large we have the scandal of bankers' bonuses, and huge pay-outs to Directors in the NHS – even in places where basic human care is lacking – with energy companies when families and pensioners are struggling to keep warm and to cook food – directors are walking away with seven figure salaries and bonuses. We have huge firms paying little or no tax. There are sex scandals in political parties, at renowned schools of music, at the BBC and among celebrities. And then there is our Church, with the news from Scotland last week, and rumours of goings on in the Vatican, only the latest of the scandals to come out. We certainly do *“live in interesting times.”*

Currently, of course, we have no Pope as the Church comes to face all kinds of issues. People have been talking quite rightly about the courage and integrity of Pope Benedict to have resigned because he knew that in his increasingly frail health he was unable to continue to try to address this myriad of issues facing the Church. I honestly don't know who would be capable of this and so we pray for the cardinals who now begin this task of finding a successor who will take on this impossible role, but also for a change in how things work.

And perhaps Pope Benedict's resignation will have **this** benefit to his successor: In a very real way we now know, something we should have known all along, namely that any Pope is – however holy and distinguished in all kinds of ways he is - as frail a human person as we are. Only God is God – the Pope is neither God nor some Superman. Perhaps in time to come further common responsibility for the well-being of our Church will be seen to be shared much more widely. Yes, to cardinals and bishops and the like, but also with ourselves.

Our certainty, our hope, our faith, is based on God and on what God does for us in Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection. Our hope and faith are fed and strengthened by the gifts God has given us in the Sacraments and in God's Word in our Scriptures, and hopefully we will find strength in those Scriptures today – in these interesting times.

In his Gospel St. Luke several times, wants to make clear to his listeners/readers that the events he recounts are for real, they are not a fairy story or make-believe – they happened at a very particular time in history. The most famous time he does this is when he recounts Jesus' birth. We all know the Reading well, *“Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census of the whole world should be taken...”*

Jesus' birth happened at **this** time in **that** place. He does the same kind of thing when Jesus begins his Public Ministry, *“In the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee..”* These events happened at **this** time and in **these** places.

The reference in today's Gospel to people executed by Pilate and others dying in an accident when a tower collapsed on them has the same effect. What St. Luke is saying is, *“The events in Jesus' life happened at a particular time and place, but they have significance for **all** times and **all** places. They are as relevant today as ever they were.”*

So we could put in place of those people – others, *“Do you think these people killed by the Syrian Army the other day, or who died in that Hot-air balloon accident in Luxor this last week, were they anymore guilty than anyone else...?”*

In the passage Jesus goes on to call for repentance and in that parable of the fig tree infers both God's patience (leave it for another year) but a warning that a reckoning **will** come. Today as we pray for the Cardinals in Rome, we realise the need for repentance and a significant change of heart at all levels in our Church – in these interesting times.

### Third Sunday of Lent 2016

I am sure that we are all well aware that of all the Gospels St Luke's portrays the most compassionate, and merciful picture of Jesus. It is here in this Gospel, and only in this Gospel, that we find such stories as the Good Samaritan, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Prodigal Son (which is next Sunday's Gospel). It is the perfect Gospel for a “Year of Mercy”. There is, however, another aspect of Luke's Gospel, which is about the urgent and uncompromising response invited from the disciple to Jesus' call to repent. The response expected is immediate and total. So, for example when the Jesus calls the fishermen brothers – Peter and Andrew, James and John, to follow him they don't just leave their nets behind. We are told that they “left everything and followed Jesus.”

Today's Gospel is another example of this strand in Luke's portrayal of Jesus. Just before today's extract Jesus has been engaged in a diatribe at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and has warned people very directly not to follow their example. He has warned them about the urgency of making the decision to follow **His** ways in the parable about the farmer who built ever bigger barns in which to store his increasing earthly possessions, while putting off to a later date anything to do with the spiritual side of life. He has invited people to sell everything and to follow him, and warned them to be "dressed for action with lamps lit", to read the signs of the times that point to this urgency, and at this point some unidentified people come up to him with a question.

Jesus is on a roll and if the people who ask Jesus that question in today's Gospel thought they were putting forward an would distract Jesus from this incessant call to be ready, to respond now, they were sorely mistaken, as we can see. Jesus simply 'ups the ante' – when he poses an even more difficult question in response. It is one thing to ask about the innocence or otherwise of victims of a vicious governor like Pilate, it is quite another to ask about the innocence, or otherwise, of those who die in what appears to be a freak accident. You can expect random thuggery from a twisted tyrant like Pilate – people's innocence or guilt would have meant nothing to him. He was simply intent on stamping out any and every sign of rebellion among the Jewish people as ruthlessly as possible. People dying in a random accident – like that perhaps at the Didcot Power station during this last week – is of another order.

The point Jesus makes is that no victim is more innocent or guilty than anyone else. At some point, however, we will all be called upon to give an account of our actions. And now he turns the tables on his questioners away from an abstract theory about guilt to what **THEY NEED TO DO**. The thing to do is to live in the here and now – not in the past which we cannot possibly change, nor in the future about which we have no control either. In the here and now, and in every here and now, we are called upon to realise that we always fall short of all that we could be, of all that we could do.

The key sentence in all of this (and notice that it is repeated in this passage) is undoubtedly, "Unless you repent you will all perish like they did." Unless you have a complete change of direction **NOW**, be warned, you will get your comeuppance and it might come sooner than you had bargained for. This is not so much a threat of eternal damnation sometime in the distant future, but a reminder of dire consequences in this world if behaviour is not changed here and now. Perhaps like that fig tree you may be lucky to have a reprieve of a year, but be on your guard.

So, here we have that other side to Luke's Gospel. For sure, as we will hear next week in our Gospel of the Prodigal Son, the Father is eager to be completely merciful but, there is an urgency to respond to these calls to receive the Father's compassion and it is a key part of our Lenten observances. The time is **NOW**.

### Third Sunday in Lent 2019

Every time we gather to celebrate Mass right at the beginning the priest always says something like, "To prepare ourselves to celebrate this Mass let us call to mind our sins." I wonder what happens then in the pause between those words and our act of penitence? I know that for myself there are many times when my mind simply goes blank... nothing. At other times something comes to mind that I want to bring to God for forgiveness, but oftentimes... indeed most times, nothing. Repentance is a major theme of Lent – asking forgiveness for whatever is holding us back from being able to become fully all that Jesus asks of us in our Gospels, and yet it can be so commonplace a call that it can pass us by without impacting our lives at all.

Repentance is also a key theme in our Gospel for this year: St Luke's. In this Gospel we see that it is how Jesus begins and ends his public ministry. At the beginning when called to follow Jesus, Peter protests, "Leave me, Lord, I am a sinful man." Peter is forgiven and follows. In almost his final act on the cross Jesus forgives the Repentant Thief, and throughout the Gospel the theme keeps re-appearing. It will in our Gospel next Sunday in perhaps the most famous parable about forgiveness: The Prodigal Son.

For this week we find Jesus making an urgent call to people to repent **NOW**, citing the examples of some unsuspecting people whose demise came out of the blue in an accident and others caught up in one of Pontius

Pilate's regular purges of dissidents. No historical account outside the Gospel refers to either incident but we can assume that they were known to Luke's original audience and could be relied upon to give a salutary warning.

At this distance in time the examples do not hold any sway over us, but perhaps others closer to home might. A week passed Friday a group of innocent people gathered to offer their customary weekly prayers in two mosques in a city in New Zealand, only to have 50 of their number murdered by a deranged gunman. The very fact that this could happen in a city named "Christchurch" is surely the ultimate blasphemy. Last week people were going about their ordinary lives – at work, in schools, at home – in parts of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe only to have their lives literally ripped apart by a violent storm and subsequent flooding. These people were no more guilty of any particular wrongdoing than any of us, and yet here we are gathered to pray in safety in contrast to the horrors that struck them.

Dramatic warnings can work in a number of different ways: we can become paralysed like rabbits caught at night in the headlights of a car, not knowing what to do; or we can shake ourselves out of our complacency, our unconscious routines in life, and have a good look at ourselves through the eyes of faith. Taking a step back and looking at our lives through the lens both of Jesus' call to follow and his mercy to those who falter in doing this, is precisely what we are called upon to do as part of our Lenten disciplines.

Perhaps for five minutes or so in the next few days we might try to stop, to place ourselves in, to become aware of, God's loving presence and simply and gently to review how things have been going for us in life in the last little while. Bringing all of this to a conscious level – to be deliberate, intentional in what we do – is a major step that we are being called to take during this season. How we then choose to act in our repentance of failure to be conscious, deliberate, or intentional in what we do will be up to us, but repentance will certainly be a component part of whatever we then choose to do.