

The confluence of several different events this past week has left me reflecting on the fragility of life. This past Saturday marked the 14 year anniversary of the BP Texas City explosion which killed 15 people and injured countless more. As some of you know, I was there that day. It was a beautiful spring day, and we had no warning that it might be our last. I was also recently visiting with a friend who broke his neck playing on the trampoline with his kids. It was a freak accident which he survived by the grace of God, but it could have ended up being so much worse. I could point to numerous other examples; recent deaths at our parish, people suffering from cancer, the recent airplane crashes. Together, all of these things remind me that life is a fragile gift which we could lose at any moment without warning.

In our Gospel, Jesus takes an example of a tragedy in his own day to make the same point. He points to people who had recently died in tragic circumstances to highlight the fragility of life. Jesus said that they did not die because they were evil people, i.e. they weren't being punished by God, but that death comes for all of us when we least expect it. For this reason, Jesus warns us to be prepared for we know not the day nor the hour. We must convert and repent from our sins lest we suffer the true death of an eternity separated from God.

Jesus deepens this message with the image of a fig tree planted in a beautiful garden. When the owner of the garden comes to search for figs and finds none, he becomes angry and tells the gardener to cut the tree down so that it no longer exhausts the soil. In this parable, we are the fig tree. We have been planted in the garden of our Lord's delight, surrounded with every grace that we need to bear fruit in our lives. Christ is warning us that if we do not produce good fruit in our lives when we have been planted in such good soil, then one day we will be uprooted and cast into the eternal fire.

Even so, it is important to note that Jesus was not some fiery Baptist preacher trying to scare us into conversion. Jesus' warning and call to conversion is followed immediately by a message of God's mercy. When the owner of the garden tells the gardener to uproot the fig tree, the gardener says, "Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down." In this parable, God is the owner of the garden and Jesus is the gardener. How powerful is it to think about the fact that Christ Himself is interceding with His Father for us, asking God to give us more time to convert and produce good fruit in our lives as we should.

We see this mercy highlighted in our first reading. God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint... so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore, I have come down to rescue them." God's hears our cry and comes to rescue us. His greatest desire is to save us, not destroy. God wants to do everything that He can to save us and help us bear fruit in our lives. This is highlighted, in a sense, by the symbol of the burning bush. Moses was surprised that the bush, though burning, was not consumed. The flame of God's love does not consume by destroying but by fulfilling. God wants to fill us with His fire so that we are transformed and filled to overflowing with His presence in our lives.

In the Scriptures, every single time that God calls someone to conversion, He then immediately gives an invitation to be in a relationship with Him. In our first reading, God reveals Himself as a God of relationships, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. We are not saved through empty rituals or prayers or meaningless observance of the Law. Instead, we are saved through a relationship with God. This was clearly revealed in the life of Christ. Jesus always called people to repentance from their sins, and then invited them to come and follow Him.

Another way of thinking about this is that we are not saved through fear but through love. We might be like little children and obey someone out of fear, but this doesn't actually transform us into better people. Fear only serves to constrain and paralyze us. It doesn't allow us to grow and transform. Fear may keep me from jumping out of a plane, but it also keeps me from learning how to fly. Love, on the other hand, gives us wings. It gives us both a reason and the strength we need to change and transform so that we can obtain our hearts desire. The call to conversion is always a call to love, a call to sacrifice ourselves for love.

This Lent, we are being called to a conversion of love. We are being called to leave behind the garden of this world and its seeming delights to enter into the desert. There, we can encounter our Lord through the spiritual practices of prayer and fasting and almsgiving, and be transformed by His love for us. His love can then awaken a desire in us to give ourselves in love as well, to give ourselves in love to Him and those around us. In doing so, we are transformed from barren fig trees to burning bushes.

It is easy to put all of this off and to say that I have time before I accept the Lord's invitation to a relationship with Him... that I have time before I sacrifice myself for others out of love. The truth, however, is that we do not know the day nor the hour. We do not know if we will die today or many years in the future. Life is fragile, so we should never put off our conversion until tomorrow. If we do, then we run the risk of being cast out into the darkness. More importantly, we run the risk of never truly loving... of never truly letting those around us know that they are loved... of never truly being transformed by God's all-consuming love. While this requires sacrifice, this love will transform us until we are filled with God's presence, filled with a flame that will burn within us through eternity.