

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 3rd Sunday of Lent Year C (2025)

What is your earliest memory? As a mental exercise, think for a minute what is your earliest memory you can recall. I have a vague sense of getting hurt in a Big Wheel accident, and early childhood camp trips. But they don't get clear until kindergarten. Child Development psychologists debate about early how early the brain can go back, as they hypothesize about a brain reset (or neural over-writing) at about 3-4 years old, after the body has learned its major functions (concrete operations etc), and then the higher mind functions (conceptual operations) optimize. But it's a curious exercise, isn't it? But what I am really after this morning, as a pastor and preacher, I'd love to hear from you about what is the earliest sermon message you remember hearing?

Classic literature tells of some memorable sermons, that seem remembered from the author's childhoods. Irish writer James Joyce, tells (*in his autobiographical Portrait of the Artist as young Man*) of a character Stephen Daedalus who sits through a 3 day Jesuit retreat at Belvedere College, Dublin. He hears a sermon by Fr Arnall on "4 Last Things of death, judgement, hell and heaven", & immediately after, runs out to find the first priest he can to go to confession. Or another popular book scene, comes from French writer Albert Camus in his The Plague, where Fr Paneloux fierily preaches about their town being stricken by a plague because of sinning in the community. Another character Dr Reieux, the story's real hero, reacts against the simplistic preaching of Fr Paneloux, knowing 1) as a doctor the more complex causes of the plague's outbreak, and 2) that God is more wisely compassionate and provident than to ever inflict plague broadly upon everyone. Dr Reieux's sense of God motivates him to sacrifice himself, (*not sneaking out of the town, but*) remaining to work among the contagious victims to comfort and doctor them, serving some relief in their last days. (*Some other popular literary sermons include Fr Zosima's sermons in Brothers Karamozov, or the eccentric Hazel Motes in Flannery O' Connor's novel Wise Blood*). My own earliest homily remembered, came from my childhood pastor Fr Victor Boarman. He dealt with exactly today's gospel message from Jesus: Why do bad things happen to good people! Maybe I was in the 4th grade, serving at an early daily mass before school and he preached on a tragically sudden death of a teenager in our parish. Fr Boarman talked about the innocent suffering and how it is a struggle to understand why tragedies happen. His homily stuck with me. Maybe his answer doesn't speak to me the same today, as it did then, but it was a start (*again, I do remember it-what was I, 9-10 yrs old?*)

His explanation was down here on earth, we only see a part of the whole of this thing called life. We don't see how all these things of God fit together. But, still, God is in control and we must be patient, trust and fulfill our station here whatever that is, for each of us. When God calls us up, whenever that is, we will receive the full answer, but from our position here now, it's all compartmentalized

and we only see a piece of the whole of life! (Fr Boarman knew his scripture, because his message is basically, God's response to the suffering Job in chapter 38 ('So you would judge me', says God, 'were you with me when I created the stars' etc) and also St Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 13: 11 (Paul says, 'We see now only through a glass darkly & partially, but then-heaven-we see clearly face to face). Maybe the fact that I remember Fr Boarman's sermon from so early, shouldn't surprise me, because the question faced is life's biggest one - "Why do bad things happen-why is there suffering in this life for good folks?". This is exactly the gospel we hear today. People bring Jesus terrible news about the brutal and sacrilegious cruelty of Pilate – he had slaughtered innocent Galilean worshippers (*Worse, he will later crucify the God from Galilee!*) and he mixed their blood in with the temple animals' sacrifice-basically conducting human sacrifice in Jewish Temple! Jesus responds firmly and fast, to this story that we are not to rashly presume the people are guilty of any sin, any more than anyone else standing right there then. Jesus knows the human tendency to self-righteously condemn others by blaming them (*better you than me*), and he says, 'By no means!' In fact, repent yourself and come to their help (redeem their suffering by responding with grace – come to their aid!) Jesus is saying, "Stuff happens in this world, but answer it with charity and compassion." In this fallen world, yes, sad but true, innocent people suffer-bad things happen to good Christians- there is no fault of theirs in the suffering.

To show how tuned in Jesus is to human suffering (that is his real answer- he understands and 'gets us'- God enters our suffering with us to see us through it). Jesus adds some recent news of a tragic, tower collapse that kills 18 unsuspecting villagers. Why? Well, Jesus knows the questioning heart of us all, and he basically says, we can stay stuck in that question and spin ourselves silly, or we can rise up to meet life, and be better because of (through) such pain and suffering. Yes, the world's ways are unfair and spread misery, but that doesn't stop Christians from being good (*in fact, darkness makes the light shine brighter!*) When bad things strike, good people show up! I can't control what happens to me, but I can control what I do after that happens. Since life is not fair, am I going to slump into hostile resentment and selfish hedonism or am I going to be the 'difference'? Grow bitter, or be better? Jesus teaches that when the world delivers bad news, Christians bring good news! The world may sack us with suffering but Christians respond with redemption (We answer the evil with grace). And above all, Jesus is quick to rule out any shame-blaming of victims – (*Again, don't we humans we tend to do this-so unhelpfully!-does our rash condemnation of them, make us feel better than them-in fact we are adding energy to the evil when we do that!*))

This passage in Luke 13 is not the only place Jesus addresses why bad things happen. Over in John 9:2-3 Jesus and apostles stumble upon a man blind from birth and His apostles will ask, "Who sinned (man or parents) that he was born

blind?” Jesus **emphatically** responds, ‘No one-don’t jump to conclusion-blaming the poor man.’ Again, in this imperfect-fallen world, stuff happens. Jesus adds, that this man’s blindness can lead us to see more. Again, when the world deals out suffering, Christians respond with grace, answering the suffering with compassion, pushing in to add the good by serving the person’s relief. Jesus’ solution to why good people suffer is a loving call to action to redeem the wreckage. In John 16:33 Jesus says, *“In the world you will have trouble, but be strong, I have overcome the world”* His cross is the answer. Is life not fair? Nothing is any more unfair than the crucifixion of Perfection itself – Jesus on the cross! But Jesus shows up for us – done out of love. Jesus calls us to answer evil the same way – embracing pain with others as a pathway to peace. When the bad happens, the good show up. That is Christian. What makes us is not what happens to us, but how we respond to what happens! Tyrants are cruel and towers collapse, but Christians shine brighter by kindling hope and answering other’s suffering with compassionate service. We don’t blame. We better every situation by allowing Christ to shine brighter in our response. Being with others as He is with us!