3rd Sunday in Lent 2025

We are constantly bombarded by news bulletins - smartphones, the internet, television, radio, and other outlets, provide a never-ending flow of news – much of it deeply distressing. While being informed about world events is obviously important, the “media overload” of the appalling suffering, in so many parts of the world, can be so overwhelming, that one can hardly bear to watch the daily news. It may, therefore, come as an unpleasant surprise, that in today’s Gospel passage, we come face-to-face with two situations which could come straight from a daily news bulletin! One is an act of barbarity by a dictatorial thug, the other a tragic accident, caused by the collapse of a defective building.

The Gospel relates that some people had come to tell Jesus about these tragic events. Lying behind their report was the question “What does it mean? Is this the beginning of something worse?”. We too ponder on contemporary tragic events in a comparable way, wondering about the future of our society, and indeed on the future of the planet itself.

What had happened in Jerusalem was that a group of Galilean pilgrims, country folk, a bit rough around the edges, but fervently religious, had come to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Outraged on seeing pagan Roman soldiers patrolling within the precincts of the Temple, they made their feelings felt; in all probability they threw stones at the soldiers – a reaction with which in this city we are familiar! Pilate dealt with the unrest by ordering his troops to “cut them down”, thus, as the Gospel says, *“their blood Pilate mingled with that of their sacrifices”*. Some, in a state of bewilderment, asked Jesus, “how could this happen to good, religious people, in God’s own Temple?” We too are similarly perplexed, and profoundly upset, as we hear, and see, ordinary decent people suffering at the hands of the powerful. We are also deeply perplexed when a terrible tragedy, such as the collapse of a building, as at Siloam, takes the lives of ordinary decent people, and wrecks families for ever.

No matter how often we mull over the questions as to why tragedy touches the lives of so many, we just have no answer. There are those, of course, who subscribe, to what was a common understanding among Jesus’ contemporaries, that tragedies and disasters are a punishment for sin. Jesus himself, however, makes clear that, in this life, good fortune or disaster is no indication of a person's moral and spiritual standing. He does insist, nevertheless, that conversion is an urgent need in everyone’s life. To persist in sin, he says, is the ultimate tragedy. While this is indeed a sombre message, Jesus concludes his comments by telling the parable of the fig tree - a heart-warming parable which points to God's patience - God waits, and gives every opportunity, for the sinner to turn back to him.

We recognise, that outside of prayer, there is little that you and I can do to alleviate the intense suffering of so many in our world. But we can, indeed we must, acknowledge that, in our personal lives, every selfish act, no matter how insignificant, contributes to making this world that little bit less loving, less God-like. This suggests to us that a good sacramental confession has social consequences! All sin, be it great or small, wounds to a greater or lesser extent, society, the Church, and ourselves. Forgiveness also has social consequences – it heals.

A key moment in this Jubilee Year 2025 is the celebration of **“24 hours for the Lord”.** This is an initiative of Pope Francis, andin response to this initiative in our Diocese ofDown and Connor “24 Hours for the Lord” will be celebrated next Saturday, 29th March, in three centres: St Mary’s Church, Belfast, All Saints Church, Ballymena, St Patrick’s, Church Downpatrick. Priests will be available for confession from 11.00am until 5.30pm. Those who journey to one or other of the churches mentioned, will be participating in a special way in the Holy Year as “pilgrims of hope” seeking a “genuine, personal encounter with the Lord Jesus” *(SNC 1).*

Many of us, for one reason or another, have become hesitant about availing of confession, and for some, the habit of confession was broken by the recent pandemic. Perhaps, in this Jubilee Year, we can begin to reconsider – it is just a fact that a good confession is good for us on many levels. Jesus is there, he waits for us, his hand extended in welcome. He is not interested in how long it is since our last confession; neither is the priest; Jesus is not interested in our sins, no matter what they are; neither is the priest. He seeks not carefully prepared detailed lists, but only an honest heart; the priest is there to assist. Jesus is only interested in offering forgiveness to those who ask; the priest is merely a channel of that forgiveness. Jesus says, “*Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you peace” (Matt.25:28).*

*“Lord,*

*it is you who forgives all our guilt,*

*who heals every one of our ills,*

*who crowns us with love and compassion”.* **Amen.**