

THIS WEEK'S HOMILY FROM FATHER JIM

Third Sunday of Lent: *'Chosen': does it mean that all must be well?*

1st Reading: Exodus 3:1-8,13-15 : *God promises to free chosen people.*

2nd Reading: I Corinthians 10:1-6,10-12 : *Chosen people = foretaste of Jesus;*

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9 : *'Chosen' was not an automatic guarantee of security.*

At first sight, this Sunday's readings appear to have nothing to do with us: they have a very 'Jewish' feel to them. The theme seems to be that of God's promise to the Hebrews through Moses, followed by Jesus' comments on how far this promise would go in making their lives permanently secure. But, if we dig deeper, I think that we'll see a message (especially in the gospel) that speaks to us today. I hope you don't find this material too hard going!

Briefly, the first reading mentions the call of Moses, his task of freeing the Hebrews from slavery, and the giving of God's strange name ('I am' – or 'Yahweh' - or 'Jehovah'). St Paul (second reading) refers to this Exodus story, seeing the Jews' escape at the Red Sea as a symbol of Christian Baptism, but also as a warning: many suffered in the 40 years in the desert, so we should not be complacent, thinking that nothing matters any more – especially morality.

However, the gospel has the main message for us. (Please read it!) Jesus deals with two issues that matter a lot to us. The first is this: how is it that "good" people – 'Chosen' by God - must still suffer like anybody else in the world? To update this: how & why does God allow Ukrainians (still a fairly religious group) to be killed by Russian artillery? In the gospel passage, Jesus refers to an atrocity in Jerusalem, where Pilate (the Roman Governor) had had some Galileans killed, and their blood mixed with that of animals sacrificed in the Temple. He also mentions people killed in a civil-engineering accident, where 18 died when a tower collapsed on top of them. He makes the point that none of these victims had any moral responsibility for their sufferings. (Remember that many Jews at that time saw suffering & death as a direct punishment for previous sins.) The first group died because of Roman cruelty; the second because of a fluke accident, or, at worst, the builders' carelessness.

I, like millions down the years, must face this nagging question: "Why does God, who is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, allow human suffering and death, especially when the victims are innocent people?" In reality, the question asks: if God is all-good, why doesn't he want to stop it; if he's the other two, why can't he stop it? This has bothered believers for centuries, and is a reason why many lose religious faith altogether.

Sorry, but I haven't an easy answer to this. All I can suggest is that God is not a "super-man" in the sense of being a lot more powerful / knowledgeable / good than we are, so that he is just much better at all these things than we are. We believe that he is totally different from us in everything. The only clear-cut things we can say about God (not even if it's a "he" or a "she"!) is that God is both 'personal' and 'love'. By 'personal' I mean having a relationship with us in a conscious, meaningful way. By 'love', I mean God wants our good - this isn't just an emotional feeling of niceness – it's an act of the will. (The sort of thing we might do in sending a cheque for Ukrainian refugees, even though we don't know any of them personally.)

This means that God is the source of all goodness in the world – whether done by religious people or non-religious people. Whenever we make a decision for the good of others, that's when we reflect God's love. What God's love does not do is to abolish all laws of science that affect how the universe works (eg natural disasters), or to avoid all effects of wicked people's free-will decisions (eg hurting or killing the innocent; starting unjust wars). We know that God's Son died on the Cross, through other people's free (but evil) choices.

The second difficult topic in the gospel is the parable of the barren fig-tree. It's really about practical morality. God wants to give us more chances to do the right thing – just as the landowner told the workman to give the tree more chance to produce fruit, before digging it up. The problem is this: if we take belief in God away, what motive do people have for being 'good'? Some modern writers argue that, without a God as a 'spiritual policeman' threatening eternal punishment, people see no need to be morally 'good'. There isn't the space here for a long discussion of this, but I think you'll see the point. What those writers ignore is that many – including those with no religious belief - have a natural sense of what they ought to do, especially if their actions affect others' happiness. This explains the spontaneous generosity of so many here (of all religions and none) to victims of the Ukrainian crisis. What's more, most of us who have a religious belief tend to do the right thing in response to God's love, rather than through simple fear of hell-fire.

I hope I haven't bored you! However, I suggest that many thinking Christians (of all churches) find suffering and evil hard to reconcile with a loving God. For us, the answer lies in what God's own Son endured at Calvary.

Fr Jim Dunne.