

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Year C: Ex 3:1-8a, 13-15; Ps 103; 1Cor 10:1-6, 10-12; Lk 13:1-9

March 20, 2022

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One message for us from the Scriptures for this Third Sunday of Lent is the patience that God shows in dealing with us.

In the first reading, we heard how God announced to Moses from the burning bush that He would rescue the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt. The Lord told Moses, *“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”*

In the second reading, though, from the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reminds us that the Hebrew people rebelled and grumbled against God, even after He had rescued them from slavery. At one point, the Israelites complained to Moses, *“Were there no burial places in Egypt that you brought us to die in the desert?”* (Ex 14:11). At another time, they grumbled, *“If only we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!”* (Ex 16:3). And, again, they grumbled, *“Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?”* (Ex 17:3). Even after God had fed them in the desert and provided them with water from the rock, the Israelites complained about their hardships, as if it would have been better to be back in slavery in Egypt. They were testing God’s patience, and St. Paul tells us, they were eventually punished for it.

In the Gospel, we hear the short parable Christ told about the fig tree that did not bear fruit. The owner of the orchard says to cut it down, because it has not borne fruit for three years. But the gardener pleads for patience and for more time: *“[L]eave it for this year also,”* he says, *“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.”*

If the owner of the orchard represents God, and the fig tree represents each of us, perhaps the first question we should ask is, why did the tree not bear fruit? For three years in a row, it was fruitless. This should prompt each of us to ask ourselves, where and what is the fruit of our own faith? What fruit does our own

relationship with God produce in our lives, in our families, and in the world? What are the visible effects of our faith in God? And, if we don't see as much fruit as we should, we should ask ourselves, why not? Why is our faith not bearing fruit for God?

One reason why the faith of a Catholic might not bear fruit is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the faith. Sometimes, we accept a surface-level understanding of our faith and don't make enough efforts to learn and understand more about what the Church teaches and why. This takes time, and it might mean we have to sacrifice something else we enjoy doing in order to have time to study the faith.

Another reason we might not produce fruit for God is a minimalist attitude about the faith. Sometimes, we aim to fulfill the minimum requirements of being faithful, such as attending Mass on Sunday, but then don't practice the faith outside of Church. For example, families might not pray together before meals, or at any other time in the home.

Another reason why we might not bear fruit for God is that we are weighed down by attachments to things that distract us from focusing on our faith. We might even measure our thoughts and actions by some standard of the world, rather than the teachings of Christ in the Gospel.

Another reason why we might not bear fruit for God is that we think of our faith only as something to rely on when we are in need, rather than the duty of praise we owe to God in both good times and bad. Our faith should make us praise God all the time because of who He is, rather than because of what we need.

Whatever the reason we may not bear fruit, the parable of the fig tree reminds us both that God is patient with us, and also that He does expect our faith in Him to be fruitful. "Jesus' parable about the fruitless fig tree is meant to give us both hope and fear: hope for the second chances that God gives us throughout our lives – chances to reform our lives – and fear that these second chances cannot last forever" (Peter Kreeft, *Food for the Soul: Cycle C*, 196). The Lord is patient with us because He does not wish "*that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (2Pet 3:9). "*Therefore,*" St. Paul says, "*whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall*" (1Cor 10:12).