

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)

This is quite a challenging gospel reading, and it is important that we hear it correctly. It might seem as if Jesus is saying, “*Shape up, or a ton of bricks will fall on you!*” But the thought that disasters and personal tragedies or untimely death are a form of punishment for one’s sins is explicitly rejected in all four gospels. The background of this particular exchange was the general belief among the Jewish people of Jesus’ time in a one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering. Anyone who suffered, many thought, was being punished for sin. Jesus attempted to correct this thinking, indicating that suffering is not always a result of sin.

Pain, hurt, and suffering happen to all people, everywhere. Some of it is caused by the randomness of nature, and is no one’s fault no matter the immensity of the tragedy. The people of Haiti and Chile are probably anxious to discuss this perspective with you. Other times, we bring on the suffering in our world through our own sinfulness and our response to sinfulness in others. We cannot allow these realities, though, to lead us to a kind of existential nihilism, or a deep despair, or even a sense of hopelessness. In fact, the season of Lent reminds us that we can, and do, change—that our world, and its people, can be transformed. In brief, we are people of hope.

The point of Jesus in this gospel reading is that we don’t have forever—we only have so much time to live, so much time to love, and so much time to change. And so, a better understanding of his words of warning would be to say that if we do not use the time that is given to us—this life... this Lent... this day—to reform or transform our lives, then death, which keeps its own schedule, will rob us of the opportunity to do so. Like the fig tree in the gospel, we have a certain amount of time to change and become fruitful. We should always remember not give up on ourselves, because God does not give up on us.

In the parable about the fig tree, the tree had produced no figs for three years. The vineyard owner wanted to cut it down, saying, “*Why should it use up the soil?*” The

vinedresser, however, pleads for a year's extension, promising to tend the tree with more than the usual care. He is asking that the tree be shown a bit of mercy, hoping that it will be transformed. But in the end he allows that if nothing happens, the tree can be cut down. We are given here an image of God's impatience, willing to offer mercy, but expecting to see something happen as a result of that mercy. God always has such high expectations for us as his children!

This winter we witnessed one of our great sports icons, Tiger Woods, plead on national TV for some time and a chance to cultivate and fertilize his fig tree so that it might produce good fruit. For nearly fourteen minutes inside the clubhouse at Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, we saw a broken man blame no one but himself for succumbing to the ills of entitlement that began his downward spiral. The words sounded like they came from a person who finally realizes he will be judged by his actions. The tears that appeared in his eyes and the anxiety obvious in his voice seemed to indicate he had been transformed. He was asking his family, his friends, the golfing world, and the nation for mercy.

Cynics have said that this is just another insincere, crafted message produced by Team Tiger, to preserve what is left of their investment. We do not really know at this time. But for Tiger's sake, and the sake of his family, I hope this was his first step back to being a better man, before he even thinks of being the best golfer again. I hope he can, over time, be transformed by the mercy he has pleaded for.

I cut this article out of the Frederick newspaper sometime in 2007:

*McLean, VA—Cheryll Witz was shopping for a birthday cake when her cell phone rang. Waiting to speak to her was one of the nation's most notorious serial killers—the man who killed her father five years ago. “I need to apologize for what I've done to you and your family,” Lee Boyd Malvo told her. Witz stood, “bawling my eyes out,” in the aisle of a Costco store in Tucson, Arizona.*

*In March 2002, Malvo shot and killed Witz's father, Jerry Taylor, from long range as he practiced chip shots on a golf course practice green in Tucson. The*

*slaying was a precursor to a sniper spree that terrorized the Washington DC area, in which the teenage Malvo and partner John Allen Muhammad killed ten people and wounded three others over a three week span in October 2002. Malvo placed the call to Witz through a third party. He initially called a producer at ABC News, who then used three-way calling to connect Malvo to Witz. Such calls violate prison policy.*

*“The first thing he said was, ‘I tried to write a letter to you but I couldn’t. I didn’t know what to say.’” Witz said. She remains angry but said it was important to hear Malvo’s apology directly. “I told him that I was glad he didn’t get the death penalty. I told him, ‘You need to think about what you’ve done,’” Witz said. “He said, ‘The Lee (Malvo) then and the Lee (Malvo) now are two different people.’”*

Cheryll Witz extends generous mercy to Lee Malvo when she says, *“I’m glad you didn’t get the death penalty”*. Like Tiger Woods, we really do not know what is in Lee Malvo’s heart. We only hear his words, which seem to indicate that he has been transformed by that mercy into a new person. If this is the case, we can only give thanks and praise to God that this occurred while Lee Malvo still had time to be pruned and cultivated and fertilized—because that kind of transformation in any person is a great gift.

The author C.S. Lewis once said that Satan’s greatest weapon is convincing human beings that there is plenty of time! We pray today that we may cherish and value the limited time we have each been given-- and that we may be strengthened through the Eucharist we share to be generously merciful to others, so that we may be transformed by God’s mercy ourselves.