

Sunday, March 23, 2025
The Third Sunday In Lent

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

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The Antidote to Guilt

After Rome, one of the cities I miss most is Oxford, in the UK. Nowhere else I have seen the same hue of golden light reflected by the lime stone of its colleges at sunset, or been restored by more peaceful walks than those afforded by its meadows. I remember with equal fondness even the less celebrated corners of the city. I am thinking of Friars Entry, a tiny alley between Gloucester Green Town Square and Madgalen Street, one of the busiest roads of the city center. The English School I attended when I first moved to the UK was in that alley. Just round the corner of Friars Entry there is the vicarage of St Mary Madgalen. I knew well the then vicar Fr Hugh Wybrew, and one year I lodged in that vicarage for few weeks over the summer holidays. From the window of the room I occupied that summer I could see an impressive chestnut that leaned towards the street side of the vicarage.

One day in 2002, on October the 28th, there was a storm in Oxford – not a particularly powerful one in my memory. I distinctly remember spending that day reading in the comfortable safety of a nearby library. You can imagine my shock when, at lunch time, that day, I was told that the 20-tonne chestnut near the vicarage had been uprooted by the wind and crushed a car with four people in it. Three of them survived, but tragically a 22-year-old girl was killed.

Even though sadly accidents of this kind are not unusual, this one had a deep impact on me – and not only for the reason that I used to walk or cycle by that chestnut almost daily and obviously part of me can't help thinking: "It could have been me".

What makes this accident unforgettable for me is more the sheer brutality of fate: what are the chances of this poor girl being there just at the split second in which the tree collapsed. When tragedies of this kind happen, we are overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness – just as Jesus' contemporaries must have felt concerning "those eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them" (Lk 13.4). A defining aspect of human psychology is that we are extremely uncomfortable with the idea of misfortunes happening by chance. We can't resist the urge to look for some sort of logic in them. This urge is an expression of our need to re-establish control – and such is its power that we are even prepared to take the blame, believe that bad things happen because we *deserve* to be punished, that calamities are the expression of divine justice. We'd rather opt for *guilt* than come to terms with the unsettling truth that no logic whatsoever presides over events of this kind – they are simply, absurdly, maddeningly random and indiscriminate.

Guilt is the greatest spiritual obstacle to Jesus' revelation of the Father's love.

Guilt does not want forgiveness – it only wants to curl in on itself, as we do when we have a wound and do not want anyone to touch it because it hurts too much. The wound though can be healed only if we relinquish control to a doctor or a nurse, trust that they can take care of us, even if it will hurt at the beginning.

If this is the case then, if the tragic events of our life are not forms of punishment, what sense shall we make of the sentence repeated twice in today's gospel: "If you do not repent you will perish as they did" (Lk 13.3,5)? At first sight, it sounds as if Jesus is saying that if we do not repent the punishment is death. But how can he deny that tragic events and death have anything to do with our behaviour in one sentence and declare the opposite in the other?

This apparent contradiction though dissolves when we pay closer attention to the meaning of the word "perish", *apollumi* in Greek.

In Luke's Gospel it is indeed used sometimes with the meaning of "destroy or perish" – but in key passages of the same gospel it means "getting lost". We encounter this verb when we are told that the sheep which had wandered in the wilderness away from the ninety-nine others was 'lost' (Lk 15.6).

Similarly, concerning the son who left his father's house to spend the fortune he had inherited with prostitutes, we are told that when he is looking after the pigs, suddenly he "comes to himself and says: 'Here I am lost'" – same verb (Lk 15.17), which again recurs when the father says about him: "He was lost and has been found" (15.32).

In this light, the meaning of Jesus' sentence is not: "If you do not repent, you will be punished by death" but "*By not repenting, you end up getting lost*" and indeed also, like the sheep and the prodigal son, risk perishing as a result.

A further instance of the same verb in Luke's Gospel confirms this interpretation. Jesus says of himself that he "came to seek out and to save" precisely those who are in this condition, those who are lost, perishing, wasting away, withering (Lk 19.10). Like any other father and mother on earth, when a daughter or a son is lost or in danger, all God can think about, all God anxiously desires and pursues is not punishment but the exact contrary: *rescue*!

The parable which follows this declaration in today's gospel confirms this interpretation.

For whatever reason, the fig tree is not able to produce figs any more – and understandably any gardener would be tempted to get rid of it. Instead, God seems to like *especially* this kind of withering trees – just as he has a predilection for lost sheep and fugitive sons, and for those who are sick, are perishing, have no hope of survival.

But there is more.

The right understanding of the sentence "If you do not repent you will perish as they did" (Lk 13.3,5) also depends on how we interpret the word *repentance*. We tend to see it as something which depends on us – a decision we have to take, a makeover. These however are rather *consequences* of what repentance really is about. Repentance is what happens when – like the useless fig-tree or the wandering sheep – we are rescued by God, reached by forgiveness, touched by his love – and are transformed by this experience.

Again the parable of the fig-tree in today's gospel visualizes this better than any explanation: repentance is the new vigour, the surplus of life given to the fig-tree by the gardener's care, when he cultivates the ground around it and fertilizes it, so that it can start producing fruit again.

In particular, repentance or conversion is all about this constant, patient, dogged *undoing of guilt* which, to use St Paul's words, "masquerades as an angel of light, a servant of righteousness" (2 Cor 11.14f). Guilt fabricates a thwarted stern, punishing divinity and resists the loving care of the patient gardener, the rescue of the good shepherd, the embrace of the forgiving father we encounter in the gospel.

In his sermon two weeks ago, Fr Carl started our series of Sunday homilies on our Community Social Outreach at Saint Thomas with an invitation to begin our Lenten journey by examining "who we are and where we are going" and in "so doing, deepen our self-awareness".

In my experience, no toxic tendency manages to elude our self-awareness while secretly tainting our motivations like guilt. How often, especially with regards to our charitable endeavours, we 'guilt ourselves' into helping other people, to atone for our privilege, or buy some semblance of righteousness in our relation with God or with others. This ends up being yet another self-defeating way of resisting the repentance Jesus is inviting us into.

Guilt hinders not only our perception of God but also our relation to other people: God and others become a means to an end, we are not really interested in them, but in ourselves.

Now let us not feel guilty for feeling guilty! You see what a rabbit hole guilt is?

We always get lost and perish in the mire of our dubious motivations. The only hope of being rescued from guilt is letting the patient gardener nourish and revive the very roots of our motivations thus allowing us to bring the fruit of authentic repentance.

We find relief from our anxious self-involvement only when we discover that there is beauty, meaning, and peace not only in *welcoming* the care of the good shepherd and the patience of the compassionate gardener, but also in *imitating* them, by offering in turn our shoulder to each other, actively seeking those who are lost, giving each other yet another chance, and another, and another.

Think the kind of community and the kind of world we can build in this way, where nobody who gets lost despairs of being rescued, nobody who is alone gives us the hope of finding a home to go back to, nobody who is withering is deprived of the chance of becoming fruitful again.
