

3rd SUNDAY OF LENT Year C

She was an Australian girl, a backpacker, working her way through Europe, visiting new countries and earning her keep as she went. For a short while during the European summer she was working as a waitress in Edinburgh. High above the roadside café where she served meals and drinks, a piece of masonry worked loose from its fittings. On this particular day it fell from the roof of the building and struck the waitress as she was serving customers, and killed her outright.

This sad and tragic accident was made all the more poignant since the girl was from the other side of the world and was only passing through. Her stay in Edinburgh was only meant to be “here today and gone tomorrow”. Now she is gone forever, and somewhere, on the other side of the world, a photograph, perhaps, looks out smiling on a family who will never see her again.

It is often said that the good die young, and certainly when young people die we can see their goodness, their unfulfilled potential and their beauty captured by the frame of death. Many a home has images of young people gone too soon.

In the face of these tragic events we are generally numb and shattered. However, there are some people in the world who try to interpret these events as if they can make some sense out of them. Some people speak of fate. It was meant to be. Some, even more incredibly, speak of “God’s will.” And there are those who actually see the avenging hand of God in these tragedies.

In the days of Jesus people were no different. A story was brought to Jesus about a group of Galileans whom Pilate had killed. Had they done something to deserve this fate? No. Jesus then reminds his listeners about some other people who lost their lives when a building fell on them. Were they bad people? Of course not.

God is not an avenger, nor is God cruel. Yet there is a lesson we can learn from life's sad events such as the premature death of a loved one. Jesus tells us the story of the fig tree and of the owner who comes looking for fruit on it. It is a story about the patience of God with us, and of our need to produce fruit in our lives now ! Life's great tragedy is not about our days being cut short. That is sad, but sadder still is the willful wasting of life. But let's be very careful about who we name as "wasters" or "useless".

God is not looking for high achievers in life, as one might do in business or education. God is not into success as we might be. The story of God's own Son is the story of much failure. Jesus, himself, is forever turning our world-view upside down. The first shall be last and the last first. The least among you shall be the greatest.

Those who appear to be wasters in life may not be wasters at all. They may simply be oppressed and suffering people. The obvious success stories in life may not be successes at all. They may be truly wasted in spirit. In such a scenario, it matters little whether we speak of presidents or princes, prostitutes or prisoners. All of us are called to turn our hearts to serve the living God.

In his lifetime Jesus associated with everyone in society, the high-born, the high-brow, the low life and the riff-raff. He ate with saints and sinners. The outcasts were his friends, making their way into the kingdom before the righteous, the respectable and the religious.

It is a stark warning to us not to divide the world up into acceptable and the unacceptable people. Like the Lord himself, we are to associate with everyone. We are part and parcel of each other. Producing the fruit is a common endeavour, not a private enterprise. We are to have a care for the salvation of all.