

Faith and Fair Food

L e c t i o n a r y C o m m e n t a r y

Third Sunday in Lent, March 11, 2007

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Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalms 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke helps us wrestle with one of the great questions of our time, and perhaps of all times: there is violence and suffering all around us, but is there also hope? The reading reminds us that there is hope, and that it comes through repentance.

The story begins with a report of government brutality. Pilate was the Roman governor in charge of the occupation of Judea from about 27 – 37 CE. Someone tells Jesus that Pilate has killed some Galilean pilgrims who went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. We know nothing else about this incident except what we read in Luke. We know from other sources that Pilate was an imperial enforcer, that he was stationed in the unruly province of Judea, and that his job was to keep the province under control. Pilate was successful in this mission for about 10 years, but was finally removed from office after he executed some Samaritan leaders. They had been involved in an armed demonstration so Pilate had them killed. Other Samaritans lodged an official complaint with the Roman authorities and Pilate was finally removed as governor of occupied Judea. Apparently he was too brutal, even for the Roman Empire.

Our text in Luke takes place earlier in Pilate's term in office, before the slaughter of the Samaritans, but we see the same policy of government oppression. And it creates an ominous tone for our passage. The Galileans must have gone to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices at the temple when they were killed at Pilate's order. At this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus and his Galilean friends are also on their way to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51). Were the followers of Jesus trying to warn him? Were they trying to get him to change course? What did they expect from him?

The response of Jesus is surprising. He doesn't get scared and head back to Galilee. He doesn't use the massacre to demonize Pilate or to generate hatred against an individual official. Nor does Jesus use the report to create an ideological battle against the Romans, a partisan polarization between "us" and "them." The response of Jesus takes us deeper, to the very heart of the problem: how should the righteous respond to political oppression and violence? How do the faithful address evil?

Jesus' answer is simple, yet profoundly challenging. The Galileans who died in Jerusalem were no worse than anyone else, he said. All of us are caught up in unjust society. We all live our lives in the midst of inequality and it will catch up with us like it did with them. The structures that create poverty, violence, and oppression are all around us. The institutions that maintain poverty, violence, and oppression shape our lives. And we participate in those institutions with our jobs, our purchases, and our silences.

But Jesus goes further than a mere description of the evil around us. He offers a warning and a sign of hope. "No, I tell you, unless you repent you will perish as they did." Repentance is the road that takes us away from destruction.

Jesus drives home his point with another example. "What about the 18 people who were crushed in Siloam when the tower fell on them?" he asks. "Were they greater sinners than anyone else in Jerusalem?"

Again, we don't know anything about this tragic accident from outside sources. Our only information comes from this verse, but we can figure out approximately what happened. It was probably not just an "accident." Towers don't fall by themselves. The collapse of this tower in Siloam was probably not caused by a natural disaster like an earthquake, which would affect a larger area of Jerusalem rather than just one building. The collapse of the tower was probably an example of shoddy construction—perhaps an unscrupulous contractor or maybe laborers who did not have the materials they needed. Were there kickbacks involved for the contractor or for government officials?

Jesus brings up the collapsed tower of Siloam to sound the same warning again and to offer the same hope: "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." All of us are involved in the evil around us; all of us participate daily in the institutions that make the violence and tragedy possible. In this situation, the only reasonable response is repentance.

But what does it mean to repent? To answer that question, the author of the Gospel of Luke adds a parable from Jesus that points the way forward for us. The parable is about a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard. He waited year after year for the tree to produce figs, but the tree remained barren. Finally, he orders his workman to cut down the tree. "If it doesn't produce food, why waste the land where it's growing? Cut it down!" The workman intervenes. "Give it one more year. I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it produces food, that will be great. If it doesn't, then I'll cut it down."

During this Lenten season, we are offered another chance to repent, another year to produce a harvest of righteousness. For us, it could mean renewed courage to recognize the injustice all around us, and renewed commitment to bear fruit. Repentance might mean supporting the Campaign for Fair Food, an effort to transform our fast-food lifestyle into a vehicle of

hope for the working poor – and for us as well! The Coalition of Immokalee Workers ask us to join them in the struggle for a fair wage to support their families and basic human rights in their workplace.

After all, while fast-food may be cheap to the customer, behind that burger is a multi-billion dollar industry that requires a lot of work and a lot of coordination from the point of production to the point of sale. The rewards are huge profits, but the lion's share of those profits go to the corporations, like McDonald's, that sit at the top of the supply chain and whose low-cost purchasing controls the industry. Laborers like the Immokalee Workers do some of the hardest work but they receive little of the rewards. They are paid 40-45 cents to pick enough tomatoes to fill a 32-pound bucket. There's no extra pay for overtime, no vacation pay, no health insurance, and no right to organize to stop the exploitation. They are caught in an economic system that is designed to produce cheap sandwiches, hamburgers, tacos, and salads for us. But the food is not cheap. The farmworkers pay the price with their labor and sometimes their lives. While the CIW has also helped the U.S. Department of Justice successfully prosecute six slavery cases and free more than 1,000 workers, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Campaign for Fair Food is an effort among consumers of conscience to collaborate with the farmworkers to end their exploitation. There has been a successful agreement with the parent company that owns Taco Bell. This agreement pays the pickers an extra penny per pound and guarantees protection of workers rights. New campaigns are underway that will also lead—Lord willing—to agreements with McDonalds, Burger King and Chipotle.

And so our reading today from the Gospel of Luke challenges us to see the way that our daily purchases lead to corporate profits, which lead to exploited workers. Can a follower of Jesus deny these workers the food they need for their families, so that we can buy cheaply the food they harvest? Is the fast-food we consume more important than the justice they seek? And what of repentance?

By participating in the Campaign for Fair Food we have an opportunity to repent, to literally “turn around” a system of exploitation so that it guarantees well-being and human rights. Repentance involves a “turn around” by fast-food giants like McDonald's from working against the CIW to working with them for real change. Repentance for us as consumers involves “turning away” from ignorance about what lies behind the cheap fast-food we consume and using our voice and purchasing power to send a strong message to the fast-food industry. Through letter-writing and support of the farmworker-led McDonald's Truth Tour, this “barren fig tree” that is McDonald's supply chain, we pray, will soon begin to produce fruit.

As we approach Good Friday and Easter, the holiest Christian holiday, let us bear the fruits of repentance in our lives. Our world, our society, is just as corrupt as the one Jesus faced, and at least as violent. How many lives will be crushed by the modern towers of Siloam, and by the modern rulers like Pilate? If we don't repent, can we expect to escape the same fate?

Learn More and Take Action!

Join the CIW and their allies from the faith, student and human rights communities April 13th at McDonald's Headquarters in Oak Brook, IL and April 14th for a Fair Food Parade in downtown Chicago. Learn more about these two days of action as well as the entire "McDonald's Truth Tour 2007: Behind the Golden Arches" at www.ciw-online.org

Learn more about Oxfam America's study on how fast-food companies have a downward effect on farmworkers' wages at <http://pcusa.org/fairfood/history.htm>.

Read an article from "The Packer," a grower industry journal, where a re-packer describes the downward squeeze fast-food companies have on growers and workers and how Yum Brands by paying a penny more per pound has mitigated that effect <http://ciw-online.org/images/Packer2005.pdf>.