HOMILY FOR LENT 3 YEAR C

28 FEBRUARY 2016 ST BENET’S HALL

Today’s readings play their trump card up at the front. It is hard to follow or surpass the dramatic and commanding story of Moses at the burning bush. Moses encounters who God is: a fire that burns but does not consume, a mysterious name ‘I AM who I AM’, the living God. And Moses encounters what God will do: ‘I mean to deliver [my people] out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow’.

It is sometimes said that the aim of the preacher should be to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable and to do both at the same time. While certainly there is something disturbing and clearly there was for Moses in this Sinai theophany, nonetheless the comfort is to the fore in this presence of God and promise of salvation.

I am not sure that it is quite the same for the next two readings, where there is more of a wintry and Lenten chill in the air. It begins with the reminder that Israel did not respond to the presence of God and salvation offered them, as they might have done. In their desert wanderings, as St Paul reminds us in the second reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, many of the people of Israel failed to please God and their corpses littered the desert. ‘All this happened to them as a warning and it was written down to be a lesson for us who are living at the end of the age. The man who thinks he is safe must be careful that he does not fall.’ And in the gospel, calling to mind misfortunes and a natural disaster of Jesus’ day, of which we still have no shortage of examples in our own day ‘Unless you repent you will all perish as they did’. Of course whether we repent or not, we will all walk through the gate of death, but the quality of the repentance determines what awaits us on the other side of the gate.

But a warning, Lenten and chilly though it may be, is always an opportunity, opening up room for change, and thus though sharp it is also a sign of love. The readings present Lent to us as a time for repentance, a holy time like the testing time Israel spent in the wilderness. A holy time in which, according to the gospel parable of the fig tree, we are given opportunity to see if our tree will bear fruit: `A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it but found none. He said to his vinedresser, ``For three years now I have been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and finding none. Cut it down: why should it be taking up the ground?'' ``Sir,'' the man replied, ``leave it one more year and give me time to dig round it and manure it: it may bear fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’ God calls us into a covenant of love with himself, to love him and to love one another as ourselves. In the Old Testament the fig tree, like the vine, is an image of God’s offer of salvation: thus the repeated phrase: ‘Each man sat under his own vine and his own fig tree and there was no one to make them afraid’ (1 Maccabees 14:12). At the same time the vine and the fig are symbols of Israel’s vocation as the bridal people of the Lord, those called to make a response to the God of their salvation. So in Hosea, the prophet of the love of God: ‘It was like finding grapes in the desert when I found Israel, like seeing early fruit on a fig tree’ (Hosea 9:10).

We are in a holy time in which we are given an opportunity to see if our tree will bear fruit, as the Lord hopes, so that we may sit beneath it in peace. Towards the end of the prologue of his Rule St Benedict has a passage, which makes the same point: ‘Therefore our life span has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds. As the Apostle says Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent? And indeed the Lord assures us in his love: I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he turn back to me and live’.

There is a challenge in today’s readings to be honest about ourselves. We find that hard. It is easier and more agreeable to present an image and to believe in the image we present. The message is not to be complacent or smug, But we find it easy to be that and our blessings and gifts can come to seem our achievements. And the message is still to trust in God’s mercy. The call to repentance is an act of love because it wants to offer us forgiveness. This was the phrase in the opening prayer: ‘[may] we, who are bowed down by our conscience … always be lifted up by your mercy’. Where there is a humble and honest opening of the self, there is always a response of love from God here and now in the ups and downs of life and thus an invitation to the life that beckons beyond the door.

The images succeed one another in today’s readings: a burning bush not consumed, a rock in the desert providing nourishment but also a rock to stumble over, a tower falling on bystanders, a fig tree not bearing fruit. And beneath them an offer of salvation and a call to repent, which may or may not be heeded.

The gospel leaves us with a question. Did the fig tree in Jesus’ parable bear fruit the following year? Of course we do not know, but then it is not that fig tree that mattered but our life to which it points. This is the year of the Lord’s mercy.