

In the Gospel reading today we hear these words: **At that very time there were some present who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.**

Now the details of this situation with Pilate and the Galileans are unclear.

What is evident is that some act of startling violence had occurred,

And that the situation is presented to Jesus by some people from the crowds

As a kind of question: It's like they're asking:

Those Galileans suffered in this way because they had sinned badly, right?

And if God punishes sinners in this way, then others have in coming, right?

Which sinners is God going to destroy next, do you think?

But Jesus does not respond in the way they expected,

Or in the way we might expect.

He has a very different way of interpreting the tragedy.

This is how the reading goes on:

**[Jesus] asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'**

Jesus doesn't focus on the sins of those who suffered.

Instead, Jesus issues *a call to repentance*

To those who had questions about the sufferings of others,

He calls them, the questioners, to turn back to God.

When, after the resurrection and ascension,

The apostles proclaimed the Good News

They followed their master in proclaiming *repentance*: turning back to God.

And, more than this, they proclaimed the master himself,

As they announced the *forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name*.

In today's epistle reading we get an example of apostolic proclamation.

St Paul unpacks the Old Testament,

And especially the account of the Exodus,

To issue a call of repentance to us,

To turn us back to God, and to free us to receive the gift of forgiveness

In Jesus' name.

I'll pause here to say a bit more about this before we go on.

As modern readers of the Bible we often have a particular set of questions

When it comes to the narrative of the Old Testament,

And especially the first five books of the Bible.

The questions we have are often what we could call scientific questions:

How did the lions and antelopes get on together on the ark?

Or how exactly did water issue from the rock in the desert?

Or: This manna from heaven – if we looked at it under a microscope,

What would we find?

They're all interesting enough questions in their own way,

But they're not the sort of questions that the apostles brought

To their reading of Scripture.

When they read the Old Testament they thought:

*How does what is written here give us a call to turn back to God?*

*And how does it proclaim to us what Christ has done for us?*

Again, St Paul is doing this today, and let's listen to what he has to say.

He writes: **I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.**

St Paul here is listing different aspects of the life of God's people

As they are recorded especially in the account of the Exodus.

He is also apparently picking up some aspects of Rabbinic tradition

Regarding the rock from which the people drank.

But the point St Paul is beginning to make is that there are connections

Between God's people of the Old Covenant and the New.

In fact he is saying that there are *sacramental* connections

Between them and us: that *they* had a washing and a spiritual food

Just as *we* have baptism and the Lord's Supper.

But before St Paul develops this teaching he says: **Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.**

St Paul is reading the Old Testament to make a call to repentance.

He is giving us a warning: the people of the Exodus

all shared in a sort of sacramental life as God's people,

But this didn't mean that they could use their freedom from slavery in Egypt

To act as they pleased, without reference to God or other people.

And it's worth noting, by the way, that today's epistle reading

Is part of an extending discussion on food sacrificed to idols,

*And the proper use of Christian freedom.*

Now what St Paul goes on today makes explicit

How he is reading the Old Testament,

And how we can read it well today.

He says: **Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.**

In other words, when we read the Exodus account

It's good for us to put *our* questions on hold for a while

And to think: what is *God* saying to me through this?

How do the types, the patterns, the examples in the Old Testament

Teach me about life with God in the church here and now?

St Paul develops this way of thinking further.

He goes on: **Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as**

**some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.**

For St Paul in the account of the Exodus,  
In the account of God's people moving from slavery in Egypt  
To freedom in the promise land,  
We have types, we have examples of God's people:  
They were like us, we are like them.  
And, St Paul reminds us, God's people of old fell into the sins of idolatry,  
Of sexual immorality, and of complaining.  
He teaches us that their membership in God's covenant community  
Did not stop them from suffering the consequences of their sin.

Now it's not that we should think, 'Well, thank God we're not like them...'  
Rather, St Paul writes this: **These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.**

When we read the account of the Exodus  
We are reading about our own family history.  
Their story is our story, and their example is for us to pay attention to.  
They could fall into sin when tempted,  
Even those who were mature, who had positions of leadership.  
Who had experienced the powerful work of God in their lives,  
Even they could fall into sin.  
So we do well to acknowledge our own frailty,  
To live in humility before God and other people,  
And to watch out they we don't fall as well.

So there is the call to repentance that St Paul is making.  
The same call to repentance that Jesus made in his ministry.  
But, of course, the call to repentance is not the whole  
Of the apostolic proclamation: there is also the message  
Of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name,  
And St Paul ends today's reading on a note of hope.

He writes: **No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.**

Now St Paul does not give us specific examples of what this way out might be,  
He simply assures that that our Lord is at hand in temptation,  
And that he will provide a way for us to escape  
The destructive power of sin.  
But as we close, I'd like to explore one way out that of temptation  
That we have in Jesus.

When we sin we can feel like giving up:  
That we're spiritual frauds; that we'll never be real Christians,  
That our baptism means nothing,  
That our reception of the Lord's Supper is ineffective.

We can then be tempted to fall more deeply into that sin  
Which is the occasion for our despair in the first place:  
Whether it's trusting in money to give us security and peace,  
Or in the sedative effects of abusing alcohol,  
Or the apparent fulfillment of sexual immorality,  
Or the strange comfort that can come from grumbling about God,  
About the church, about our fellow Christians,  
Or even about the spouse, the children, or the family that God has given us.  
Maybe you've been there, maybe you're there now.  
But know God is not far away from you,  
He has a way out for you: you do not need to give up,  
You do not need to the pattern of behaviour that issues from despair.  
In Jesus you have the fulness of forgiveness from God.  
He is a bigger saviour than you are a sinner,  
And he is with you to bring you out of slavery to sin,  
And into the freedom of the children of God.  
Jesus' provides his word to you,  
And his word of forgiveness and of peace  
Is the way out of temptation and into life with God.

So let's keep our ears open,  
To listen to those whom God has sent to us, whose words are in our memory,  
And let's listen to those whom God sends to us now  
To speak the good news to us.  
Whether it's our pastor or parent or friend or relative or workmate,  
Let's listen as they encourage us to trust in the mercy of God in Christ Jesus,  
So that we may live with hope,  
And let's use the freedom we have as we turn away from sin,  
And as we look out for each other's interests.  
As we love one another.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.