I have to admit it; it’s hard for me to read the papers these days. From shocking news that disqualifies one Cardinal from voting to others being allowed to vote in the conclave! Scandal that occurs throughout the Church; scandals even within the Vatican’s walls and scandal that touches even the highest offices! Cokie Roberts said the other day on NPR that she was certain that the next pope would not have been touched by the reality of abuse! Let’s face it, no country has been unscathed by the scandal of abuse. No newspaper hasn’t had stories upon stories about the pain we are facing, and the lives that have been affected.

It seemed easier to me, when as a little boy I watched the funeral of Pope John the XXIII and saw the white smoke that announced Pope Paul VI, to the ceremonies of Pope John Paul I, and just 33 days later Pope John Paul II. When I watched the conclave electing Benedict, I
knew because of his previous office that he had a terribly difficult job to do as he (quoting him): “cleaned up the filth of the Church”. Was I simply less observant and more naïve back then than I am now? Or were the times less critically aware and the media filled with dispatches mailed across the Atlantic (on slow boats) rather than transmitted in an instant through the internet?

I have found it fascinating for the pundits and international correspondents to be discussing the candidates and predicting the outcome of the conclave. How can anyone know what will be the mind of God, and how the Holy Spirit will work? At the car wash I overheard two folks talking: “They deserve it, God is finally punishing those Catholics who were so proud.” I was shocked to hear people blaming God for the things that are occurring. If it’s being said as the car wash, …it’s in some folks’ heads. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, if folks aren’t getting a bit too sure just exactly where God should be getting the blame, and the credit?
Well, this tendency for humans to speak too confidently, as if they know all about the mind and actions of God, is not a new phenomenon. In our Gospel today, as recorded by Saint Luke, Jesus is approached with someone flashing headlines from the Jerusalem Gazette, which told the recent tragic news of how the Roman Governor, Pilate, sent troops into a place of worship and killed several Galileans as they were in the very act of worship. Could there be a more terrible story? This is similar to the shocking stories that break into our headlines all too often of mass shootings killing innocent victims at schools, malls, and places of business. But in this case the killer was not a person with mental illness and a gun; he was the representative of the occupying government of Rome, using trained professional soldiers to carry out cold calculated orders. Imagine such an attack on a group of Christians during a church service, with soldiers firing automatic weapons into the congregation! That was the scene reported to Jesus. And to bring this tragedy even closer to home, the victims—or should we say “the targets”—of this massacre, were Galileans, the very area of Israel where Jesus was from, the territory of Nazareth, Capernaum, and Cana. From
Pilate’s perspective, the fact that these targets were Galileans made them all the more suspect, since Galilee had a reputation for being the seedbed of uprising and revolt against the occupying Roman government.

Perhaps these Galileans were simply profiled by Pilate, guilty just by association with their territory of origin.

Notice the reaction of Jesus to the news thrust into his face by these troubled neighbors. The unspoken question on the hearts of the people is “why?” Why did God allow this to happen? Why were some killed, and others survived? Some were tempted to answer these questions with the assumption that this display of violence might be a sign of God’s punishment for the victims’ secret sins. Jesus, knowing the tendency we humans have to speak too confidently about God’s plans and will in situations like these, answered their hidden question with another question of his own, and a definitive insight into God’s character. “Do you think these victims were worse sinners than others in that place of worship? I tell you, NO.” And to take his point a step further, Jesus simply grabbed the issue of the paper, flipped it over a few
pages, and asked them about another story reported there; the tragic report of a tower that fell killing 18 people. This time there was no evil Pilate to blame, no human intervention at all. This would be an example of what the insurance company would call “an act of God.” Again, Jesus asked if these 18 victims of a natural disaster were singled out for their sins by God? And again, he answered his own question with a clear and unequivocal, “NO.” There is no necessary connection between disaster and deserving, between suffering and sin. Only Jesus knew that day, that he was on his way to Jerusalem, to become yet another Galilean killed by Pilate as he prayed.

With these current examples still swirling in their heads, Jesus cemented his point with a parable, a brief story about a fig tree that bore no figs. Fig trees required very little maintenance, and usually bore a bumper crop of figs at least three times per year. But this flop of a tree just soaked up the nutrient of the soil and the warmth of the sun, and offered nothing back to the world’s hunger but green leaves waving in the wind. This tree enjoyed every imaginable provision and grace from
the vineyard owner, but that provision was not a sign the tree pleased the
farmer. In fact the opposite was the case. But for the intervention of a
gracious gardener, the tree was very near to the chopping block. The
parable ends, without knowing if the tree responded to the extraordinary
measures taken by the gardener. Was the second chance given to this
tree wasted? We don’t know. But the conclusion suggested by Jesus is
simply that it is as incorrect to assume that suffering is the result of sin,
as it is to assume that the absence of suffering is the result of
righteousness. We must all be very careful to assign blame or credit
with God, based only upon the presence of what we can see on the
surface.

But this we can do, and this we must do. We can do something
with the abundance we have been given, while we are able to do it—
before a tower falls on our heads! We may not have as much time to get
around to doing something beautiful and bold for God as we think. So
rather than try to figure out how our blessings might point to our
standing with God, it is far more important to figure out what we can
give back to the world in God’s name. What was the sin of the fig tree? Only that it did nothing with the ample provision it was given. And this is the sin we must examine in ourselves today, as we look in the mirror of this text. It is not enough just to refrain from committing acts of evil, the sins of commission. The greatest failure, our greatest sin, may be that we simply have done too little with what God has given to us, on its way through us, to the world. Lent is a terrific season to avoid the sins of omission—our apathy in the face of need, our withholding of love when love should have been given away. For when we bear fruit, when our actions feed the world’s deepest hunger, then we can truly say we have seen, and that we have been, “an act of God.”

I can easily admit that I’m ashamed of the scandals of the Church. Being a member of the clergy these days, I understand with new insight what it means to “drink the cup” that he drinks. It’s not an easy time, and certainly, there are no easy answers… but in my heart and soul I trust in God, that God’s love destroys the power of sin, that light overcomes darkness forever.