

2019-03-24 Ali Cooper

Lent 3: Luke 13: 1-9

May these words speak only and always of the glory of God. Amen.

At the heart of our lives there are always choices to be made, that's part of the dynamic that forms our day to day existence and informs our future - whether it be politics, (heavens above!), relationships, ethical matters - or even what shall we have for dinner tonight! We can't escape...

And if we are taking our faith seriously, our calling to be Christ-like invites a response which does indeed frequently both offer a choice - 'what would Jesus do?', and challenge the decisions that might follow. We get it wrong, we get it right, we dither and sit on the fence while we weigh up how our choices might impact on our lives.

So when faced with today's Gospel reading, and the epistle to the Corinthians, we might be understandably perplexed and/or panicked. The gospel seems to carry a mixed message - from the 'repent or else' motif to then being forgiving and hopeful: 'give the fig tree another chance, let it live to bear fruit'.

What does this say about the kind of a God we are perhaps taking two steps towards, and then one back, one moment running forwards to fall into those welcoming arms, and then hiding from in the shadows of our uncertainties? Let's come back to that in a moment, after we've taken a closer look at the passage from Luke.

So, the tower of Siloam - this was possibly situated at the southern entrance to the city of Jerusalem. The local voices of that day had reported that a tragedy had happened when this edifice collapsed on and killed 18 people, we know not when. Neither is that important. More to the point is that when buildings topple, they do so on good and evil alike.

We know that from history and our present day newsreel footage - 9/11, Syria and any number of other war-torn places. You can become a victim even at prayer in your place of worship, destruction and violence wrought by human hands, showing no mercy, indiscriminate. And what a tragedy is unfolding before our eyes after the cyclone in southern Africa. The list could go on, but I don't want to depress you!

Just let's say that although there is much good in our world, to be thankful for, to celebrate, life can be easily broken, unpredictable, whether you are saint or sinner, as misfortune does not discriminate between the elderly or the babes in arms, the fit or the frail, the penitent or the stubborn offender. The tower of Siloam did not fall just on the worst imaginable sinners as some kind of punishment but, warns Jesus, nonetheless, repent or you may perish likewise.

Oh... harsh words. Is Jesus saying that life is not just randomly fragile, but that if we make the wrong move, make only self-interested choices, then we risk bringing disaster down upon our heads?

What do we make of this? What do you think? Well, back to what kind of God... I do not believe in a God who threatens us into being better people, in spite of Paul's fearsome message to the Corinthian church. If such were the nature of God, then I wouldn't blame any one of us for heading for the church door in fear, in disappointment, in disbelief.

But I do believe in a God who wants us to be free of our burdens, those regretful harsh words we spoke, that inability we have to forgive another sometimes, our reluctance to see another point of view, whatever it is that may haunt us and stir up our conscience, imprisoning us to the past, preventing us from welcoming the future.

Jesus came precisely for that – to set the prisoners free, to make the blind see, to lift from us the weight of regret. In my experience, I do not thrive but do indeed perish a little while I hold on to these sorts of things. I wonder if this is something that is real for you too - and I wonder if this is what was insinuated in Jesus' words.

Surely Jesus' loving and compassion showed us that every time he blessed the fallen, the sorrowful and repentant, it was as if the heaviness inflicted on their lives was lifted. They were pulled free to a new and resurrected life. They received grace and light... so perhaps it is *not* to these people, those with a contrite heart, that Jesus was speaking, but to the morally careless. And sometimes that is me, and as it was once so succinctly put: 'one thing leads to another, and if I drift, I'll surely be shipwrecked'.

To lay down our frailties, regrets and so on, is not always an easy thing to do but God's desire is not for us to be metaphorically buried under a tower of guilt-ridden and emotional rubble. Heart-felt repentance is our way out and that goes beyond the idea of just being sorry. Repentance is also understood as a call to return from exile as we turn around and face a new perspective; and God's invitation of forgiveness asks us to come home and face the land and the people where and with whom we are called to live and thrive, to put down our roots into the soil of reconciliation and compassion that is fed by God's love.

Hence the fig tree! What about this story of the gardener? How does that fit in? Well look, we could have another sermon here. But maybe not now, perhaps another day, because it's a beautiful spring day out there that we should be enjoying!

Let's just end by saying that whatever conclusions you may draw from today's readings, which may be quite different to mine, let us together take some comfort from the realization that our past errors may just offer some of life's most valuable lessons, showing us what we need to know to grow in wisdom, offering clues to discern how our choices and vision and values may mature and ripen as fruits for the betterment of the kingdom of God, to whom be all praise and glory.

Amen.