

Sermon for SJB and SSC Lent 3 20th March 2022 Luke 13 v1-9

If the new Testament had never been written we would still know that Pontius Pilate was a very unpleasant and unpopular Roman governor. The Jewish historian Josephus lists several things he did that upset the local Jewish population. He records how Pilate trampled on their religious sensibilities, horrified them by bringing Roman standards with their pagan symbols into the holy temple, flouted their laws, used money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct and then brutally crushed the rebellion that resulted. We shouldn't be surprised then to read Luke's account of a group of anxious Galilean pilgrims talking to Jesus about another horrific incident - Pilate sending troops to slaughter another group of Galilean pilgrims causing their blood to be mingled with the blood of their holy sacrifices. Horrific!

So they ask Jesus was this slaughter some kind of divine punishment? His answer is clearly, NO! And Jesus follows that with another example..those eighteen who were crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them- -were they worse than anyone else? NO. It's life. "Bad Stuff happens".

It's all too tempting when disaster strikes to ask, "Why me? Why him or her? Why does God allow these terrible things to happen? Or worse, "Why has God done this?" It's one of the big questions- -if not the biggest- -that causes people to lose faith or to reject even the possibility of faith.

If you were here last week you'll remember Father Malcolm's sermon that struck so many of us so powerfully and I want to quote the bit where he spoke so eloquently about this great dilemma: this is what he said:

"I find it deeply troubling when people face great tragedy in their lives and say "why did God do this to me?" or "what have I done to deserve this?" God does not cause the road accident, God doesn't strike us down with a terrible disease as punishment for some misdemeanour, and God certainly does not make bad things happen to punish people, because to do something which is inherently bad is not possible for God who is the perfection of goodness. The story of Jesus "steadfastly journeying towards Jerusalem" can point us towards an answer for some of these problems. Jesus knew that He came to reveal the truth about God to humankind, and He knew that many people would reject what He had to show them: those who loved darkness would seek to extinguish the light that shone out through Him. In our broken and sinful world, God's spoiled world, to remain faithful to the truth was bound to cost Jesus His life. Yet He knew He could not abandon the path of loving obedience - is that not the essence of His struggle in Gethsemane? Jesus had come to show us the truth of God and the wonder of His love, and that demanded if necessary that He face a hideous death. But that is not the same as saying that God brought about His death. Ask yourself, what was the Father doing at Jesus's crucifixion? How often are we given a picture of the Father's righteous anger being assuaged by Jesus's sufferings, of satisfaction at a penalty paid? And how rarely do we think of a Father's heart

breaking with grief at His Son's agony? But surely, if He is truly the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ he is bound to be moved to pity and anguish at Jesus's sufferings: only the Father's grief is consistent with the unity of the Trinity. And the same is true when things go wrong for us. God is not striking us in anger, nor even in cold justice: the crucifixion reveals how God suffers with us, how God is there with us in the pain and grief which is simply the result of the way life is. That insight may point us in a more helpful direction as night by night we struggle to comprehend the news reports from Ukraine, and the sufferings its people are enduring.

Well, I for one have thought a great deal about that sermon since last Sunday and I know others have too. If you want to look again you'll find it on the website or in your email box.

In today's reading Jesus says clearly that those who suffered and perished were no worse than all the others. Sometimes Stuff just happens. That's life in a broken and sinful world. But we **are** all part of this brokenness. We may not be murderers or robbers or abusers but as Paul reminds us, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Sometimes "bad stuff happens" because we make foolish or simply bad choices. Sometimes it just happens and we personally are powerless to stop it.

Jesus tells the questioners not to focus on what they can't change but on what they can change- -their mindset! You have heard over and over again that the word translated as repent means literally to change direction. **Turn and look at Jesus.** Take on board his message that darkness and death will not have the last word. Hang in there with him when your life is dark. Cry out, cling on and don't be afraid. He has been there himself and he is with you in your sorrows and your joys, suffering with you in your pain, grief, anger, bewilderment, and rejoicing with you in your relief, release, tranquillity, ecstasy- -whatever it may be.

God is love and where love is there is God. His spirit of love moves through the universe whether people acknowledge its source or not. Many people are showing it right now as they open their homes to Ukrainian refugees. But it's evident in many other less public ways too. Every act of kindness, every deed of grace, every true word that builds others up is evidence of god's spirit at work in us, counterbalancing deeds of evil. Every act of thoughtlessness, unkindness, untruthfulness, words that pull others down run counter to that flow of love through our world. But they will never have the final say.

Having told those pilgrims to repent, which sounds uncompromising, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. A vineyard owner had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. Apparently figs and vines flourish well together. Naturally the owner expects to pick ripe juicy figs, but for three years running he's sadly disappointed so he tells his gardener to cut it down because it's obviously wasting valuable space. The gardener makes a surprising plea for the unfruitful fig tree. Sir, give it another chance. Let me give it the very best care possible and then if fruits, that's great. If not, then you can cut it down.

What's this parable all about? It would be good if we had time to stop there and discuss it like we do in the lent course.

Someone would surely say, it's not good business sense, that's for sure. Surely it must be about compassion- -God's compassion.

Giving his people yet another chance to show the fruit of the spirit in their lives. Paul writing to the new Christians in Galatia spells out in a beautiful list what that sweet ripe fruit should be; He writes, "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. There's nothing here about cleverness, or even hard work. This fruit does not require any particular gifting..only the desire and the will to show the love of God in our lives. It sounds simple. It is simple. But of course, as we all know, simple doesn't mean easy, especially when "bad stuff happens" that is not our fault.

We may even feel ourselves falling under the weight of our cross at some particularly dark time in our lives. On his way to Calvary carrying his heavy cross Jesus himself stumbled and fell and in his agony on that cross he cried out in the words of the psalmist, "My God my god, why have you forsaken me?" That's one of the verses that has helped me most in my darkest times and another is the verse of only two words; "Jesus wept".

Because Jesus did not give way to temptation and remained true to his mission, a mission that caused him at the age of only 33 to suffer an unjust trial and brutal execution; because three days later he was miraculously raised from death, we can know that however many times we do give way, we can be forgiven and anything we may suffer including death itself, will be only temporary. We can't explain it, though many have tried, writing many great tomes over the centuries. We can't always stop "bad stuff happening" either. But we can, with confidence put our faith and trust, in his unconditional, unfailling, eternal love and grace.

Amen.

Carole Lewis