

Sermon for 20th March 2022, Year C, 3rd Sunday of Lent

Preached at St Michael Smarden.

Luke 13:1-9

Sermon

In our gospel reading today, Jesus confronts one of the most common misconceptions in our religion, that those who experience pain, suffering, or any sort of affliction are being punished by God, either for their own sins or for those of their ancestors.

It is a question that is repeatedly asked throughout the bible. From the books of Deuteronomy and Job to Proverbs and the prophet Ezekiel, ancient theology taught that obedience to the Torah, the rules of Jewish religion, brought blessings from God, but disobedience brought a curse. And this continued to be the general understanding during Jesus' day. Even Jesus' disciples have this firmly in mind when in John's gospel they encounter a blind man that Jesus is about to heal, and they ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

You can imagine the kind of impact this sort of thinking has on a society. Anyone who is struggling or suffering, or is simply born into a low position in society, must be there because they or their ancestors have sinned. Conversely, anyone who is prosperous and successful or high-born, has been blessed by God for their goodness, or the goodness of their ancestors. How convenient for the rich and powerful to be able to self-righteously believe themselves blessed and good, while not lifting a finger to help the poor because, well, God clearly believes they deserve it, and who are we to say otherwise?

Even today, the embers of these ideas still glow in our secular society, with distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor, and a general sense

that if someone is homeless it is likely to be their own fault. Perhaps worst of all is when people inflict this idea on themselves. “Why has God inflicted this chronic pain and sickness on me? I must figure out what I’ve done to deserve it!” And conversely, some people with a lifelong faith will suddenly turn from God when they or someone they love becomes sick, because they assume that God has broken an unspoken covenant that faithful believers will be blessed with good health and wealth, and only the wicked will suffer.

Jesus is very quick to point out that the world does not work this way. In our gospel today, his fellow Galileans are rightfully furious that some of their community who were making a pilgrimage to offer sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem have apparently been slaughtered by Roman forces while doing so. The only way they can make sense of why God might have allowed this in the very holiest of holy places in their religion is that the people who died must have sinned in some horrendously grievous manner. How else can they have deserved it?

Jesus immediately diverts his listeners from this sort of thinking. “No, I tell you!” Don’t even go there. They were no better or worse than anyone else. And the same is true of those who died in that accident at Siloam, when the tower fell on them.

But then Jesus redirects the conversation to make a point which will hardly reassure us. “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Perhaps the Galileans were hoping Jesus would blame the slaughter at the Temple on the Romans, and declare the deaths at Siloam to be an accident or perhaps blame them on the Romans too, but Jesus is not a nationalist looking for an opportunity to rile up anger against the occupiers. Instead, he uses the opportunity to call his people to repentance. Jesus’ message is not one of self-righteous fury, but a cry of the heart to humanity, to turn away from selfishness and to refocus our lives on compassion and caring for others.

Yes, there is also a threat. Change your way of life because there is a deadline, a time-limit for repentance. If you leave it for some other day, if you leave it too long, it might be too late. Jesus is not saying divine judgement doesn't exist. He's very clear that it most certainly does. But it doesn't work how most people think.

The truth is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, as St Paul put it. The season of Lent is designed to remind us of this each year in no uncertain terms. But it also reminds us that divine judgement is not inevitable. There is also divine mercy. So, when the Galileans ask why some of their number had to die, Jesus reminds them that everyone is guilty of sin, and it is only God's mercy and compassion that gives us the chance to choose a better way.

This is why Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the fig tree. For three years it has failed to produce fruit, and it's therefore useless to its owner who declares that it should be cut down because it's only wasting the soil. Some have seen here an analogy to Jesus' three years of ministry and the barren fig tree as the people he has been ministering among. The owner is of course God whose judgement is that the tree's time is up, and he must cut his losses.

The gardener, however, is Jesus, who in his role as advocate for humanity, asks for more time, and promises to add manure to give the tree another chance to fulfil its purpose. And to complete the metaphor, St Augustine argued that the manure is a sign of Christ's humility, his willingness to die for his love of mankind.

The story of the fig tree shows us how God's judgement and mercy are entwined. Judgement says the sinner is not producing fruit and does not belong in God's world. Mercy gives us another chance to realise what we are made for, to flourish and produce the fruit of compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Still, it is down to us to respond to God's mercy with a fundamental change of heart. The fig tree is given one more year to demonstrate its ability to bear fruit,

but if it fails to do so, it may well be cut down. It is a metaphor designed to make the comfortable feel uncomfortable, and it is very successful indeed.