

LENT 3C 20-03-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 55.1-9; Ps 63.1-9; 1 Corinthians 10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He 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. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

Today's gospel passage contains warnings about repentance, which is a Lenten theme; and it deals with a popular kind of theology which is still current today.

We do not have any independent evidence of the events mentioned, although we might not be too surprised to learn that Pontius Pilate slaughtered some Galileans while they were worshipping. What happened when the building fell and killed 18 people at Siloam is also lost to history.

When people came to tell him about this, Jesus took the opportunity to address the kind of theology people were using- perhaps unconsciously- when they drew conclusions or made judgements about people who suffered or died as a result of actions by the authorities or through a tragic accident.

It was a commonly held belief at the time of Jesus that if something bad happened to you, you must have done something to deserve it. You can find a lot of support for this in the Bible: the righteous will prosper, and the unrighteous will not.

Maybe the folks who talked to Jesus about the people killed by Pilate's men were wondering what those people had done to deserve it: because surely if you are punished by The Authorities you must have done something. The Bible tells us that governments and authorities are ordained by God and we must obey them.

Jesus, however, recognised that those in power are not always Godly people; on the contrary, they can be dangerous and predatory. Sometimes it is necessary to stand up and speak truth to power, calling out injustice, corruption, or bad leadership. That's what Jesus did, and it got him killed.

It can be most unsettling to realise that those in power may not have our best interests at heart; we want to trust that the government, the police, the military, will always do what is right.

The problem is- they don't always do what is right.

Russian people who protest about the war in Ukraine are being arrested in large numbers and imprisoned. Civilian men, women and children are being shot and bombed as they try to escape their wrecked homes in the towns and cities of Ukraine.

Are those who are killed being judged by God and punished? They are people- some good, some bad, most somewhere in between. Just people, no more or less deserving of punishment than anybody else.

Maybe that is what Jesus wanted people to know- that when wicked leaders wage war on others they are not doing it under God's authority, whatever they themselves might believe. And those who die are no more or less in need of repentance than any of us because we ALL need to be right with God.

What then do we say about other things that kill people: collapsing buildings, car crashes, violent crime, or natural disasters- the events insurance companies call 'Acts of God': earthquakes, floods, bushfires, cyclones and tsunami? Is it reasonable to believe that God is punishing the people who die in such events, and 'sparing' those who manage to stay alive?

Jesus tells us that everybody needs to repent and get right with God because that is the way to true life, which is more than physical existence.

How do we respond when we hear of somebody we know, or know of, dies suddenly? When Shane Warne died all the media sources spoke of an 'outpouring of grief' for a popular sports person who died of 'natural causes'. It was soon confirmed that he'd had a heart attack.

Then days later a politician, Kimberley Kitching, died of a heart attack at the same age.

It is human nature to look for reasons and answers: why do some people die of heart disease and others don't? Was it genetic, was their diet wrong, were they too stressed- what did they do to deserve an early death?

We might also ask: why do so many people get cancer? Why do some people die from coronavirus and others hardly get sick at all? Why are there so many poor and homeless people?

Theologian Bill Loader writes:

"Isn't religion meant to give a theological explanation for the way things are? Indeed, one way to peace, as some people understand it, is to have sufficient explanations of such (apparent) anomalies, that one can rest up. There is a serenity in being able to affirm 'Things go well for the good; things go poorly for the bad.' This is order and security. It is also a vehicle for control. It is also a lie."

Jesus went on to tell the Parable of the Fig Tree, with its impatient owner and the careful gardener who wants to give it another chance. I can identify with this: sometimes I think a sick-looking plant should be put in the compost bin, but Allan gives it some TLC and it recovers. He has the greener thumb.

The previous passage can be seen as a warning to anyone who needs to repent and change their ways, and in this parable the fig tree is a symbol of Jerusalem's Temple leaders. The Temple establishment wasn't bearing the fruit it was intended to produce; perhaps it should be given another chance, like the fig tree, but Luke's first readers would have read this in the light of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. Towards the end of the first century everyone knew that the occupying Romans had come down hard on the Jewish nation. The Temple was set on fire and knocked down, and rebellion violently quashed. One way to find meaning in this disaster would be to conclude that Jerusalem and the Temple establishment had it coming: they didn't listen to Jesus, they weren't doing their religion right, so God punished them through the Romans.

It sounds logical, and fits in with much of what we read in the Hebrew Bible; but is it really the way God works? Does God use a big stick, in the form of someone's army, to thump people into submission?

The threat of punishment might produce obedience, but surely a loving God would prefer obedience born out of loving relationship rather than out of fear. We are free to choose; and God asks us to choose life. Choose life!

The Lord be with you.