**Lent 3C: Luke 13:1-9**

At that very time there were some present who told him 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.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Even without the testimony of the New Testament, we would know what a deeply unpleasant character Pontius Pilate, governor of Judaea was. The historian Josephus catalogued the ways in which he offended the local Jewish population: trampling over their religious sensibilities, bringing Roman standards, complete with their pagan symbols, into Jerusalem; he even used money from the Temple treasury to build an aqueduct, and then brutally quashed the resulting rebellion.

And so maybe we shouldn’t be surprised when we hear in today’s gospel that he had sent troops into the Temple where there were some pilgrims from Galilee offering sacrifices, and those troops, perhaps using the excuse that there might be a riot, slaughtered the Galileans. Their blood would literally have mingled with the blood of sacrificed animals in the Temple courtyard.

It was a bit like occupying forces going into a church on Christmas Day and beating worshippers to death. Not so very different from right-wing extremists in New Zealand entering two mosques full of worshippers and gunning down men, women and children indiscriminately.

And all this of course in the context of Jesus heading towards Jerusalem, with an entourage of, to all intents and purposes, Galilean pilgrims. Surely anyone with any sense would instantly have changed their plans. …

And then there were the eighteen who died when the tower at Siloam fell on them. Not only massacre in New Zealand, but also Cyclone Idai, in southern Africa. Man-made and natural disaster. The world is full of them. And that’s just in the last week or so.

So why do bad things happen to good people?

In today’s gospel, Jesus challenges that connection that we still instinctively make that suffering equals punishment; even if we don’t intellectually make that connection, we do so emotionally and we do spiritually – all these things are happening to me; what have I done wrong? And Jesus challenges that viewpoint, but says that nevertheless, if you don’t repent there are consequences. That is worth exploring further.

One answer that the masses seemed to cling to in explaining the murder of those Galileans and the tragic death of the eighteen was that of retribution for sin - that bad things happen to bad people; that suffering is deserved; that when people suffer, they are being punished. By that token, you need not worry about succumbing to the same fate as long as you keep your nose clean and mind your own business.

And this is a Biblical enough answer. According to Deuteronomy, disobedience results in punishment, not only for the disobedient, but for their children, and their grandchildren.

**But Jesus doesn't buy that.** The people back in the time when Deuteronomy was written had no experience of God; they believed that God was remote and distant and was responsible for their suffering. Jesus updates that belief. Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? he asks.

This is one of the few passages where Jesus does reflect on the suffering of others. But his perspective is clear: God is not punishing us. Pilate’s sin caused the suffering of the Galileans. Sinfulness can undoubtedly lead to us to inflict suffering on others, but God does not cause and does not delight in suffering.

The issue of suffering has always been there. But the lens through which we view it is often skewed: we have placed our own human flourishing at the centre of what matters, and we have assumed that flourishing means the absence of suffering.

So I can assume my suffering is about my sin and choose to distance myself from God, or I can believe that God is in my situation, compassionately with me, and receive comfort and strength from that knowledge.

Let us not forget the reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, that we heard earlier: No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone.  God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Yet so often, by our own criteria, we are suffering unfairly and therefore will no longer acknowledge God. I did it. Maybe you have done too.

But Jesus refutes the common belief – whether then or now - that suffering is punishment for sin. Whether the suffering stems from human agency (Herod or Pilate) or natural causes (the tower that collapsed), these people were not singled out by God because of their sins.

And then he tells this weird little parable about the fig tree: now, sitting under one’s own fig tree in Jesus’ day was a declaration of the belief that God was the bringer of peace, safety, and forgiveness. Fig trees appear in that sort of role in stories from 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah and 1 Maccabees. And in this one Jesus is telling, the fig tree is not producing fruit.

We live in uncertain times: for us here in the UK, it isn’t about shootings – or we pray not – or about cyclones and huge natural disaster, but it is about politics in disarray and economic uncertainty; it is about the inability to trust anything we are told, and fear and suspicion of others around us.

The owner wants to chop this fig tree down: Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil? he says to the gardener, but the gardener begs for a stay of execution: give it time.

Sir, the man replies: leave it alone for one more year; and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then go ahead and cut it down.

This land owner is giving up on his wretched fig tree, for not doing what it was supposed to do. It is easy for us to give up on our world. But true peace does take time. And we have time. Jesus may be viewed as the gardener in this story. But maybe we are too.

We have today, unlike the men, women, and children in current news, who have fallen victim to life’s tragedies. Whatever yesterday was like: disappointments, mistakes, pain and suffering, we have been given the gift of today.

Back in the late 70s, there was a film called Oh God, where a supermarket manager, played by John Denver, has a number of personal encounters with God, played by George Burns. At the end of the film Jerry – John Denver - says something along the lines of: Oh, God, just one last thing. You know all the evil in the world, wars, hunger, genocide, prejudice. Are you going to do something about all that? And God answers: I was waiting for you to.

And God is still waiting. God is still patient.

**Amen**