

Third Sunday of Lent: I Corinthians 10:1-13 and Luke 13:1-9

Prayer

Hasn't the human heart got the most amazing capacity for self-justification, for making excuses? From a child who hasn't done their homework 'the dog ate my books' to vicious leaders justifying the most appalling barbarity as we see with Russia in Ukraine. We all do: 'he made me do it mummy!' 'We have to defend ourselves...', 'it's in my genes', 'my father never loved me.... it's not my fault.' Etc etc. Or judging others to deflect from our own responsibilities, another favourite....

It seems the audience Jesus faced were like that: 'I wonder what those people did to deserve such suffering?', 'Well, I'm not like those sinners! I haven't done anything to incur the wrath of God, oh no not me.' Bit of finger pointing, bit of reliance on cultural myth.

Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers is addressing the issues causing strain in relationships with the church community and with God. There is an underlying evasive: 'oh well I'm saved, I'm safe (we're saved, we're safe?), it doesn't matter what I do now! All lack self-awareness and understanding. If the hearers had taken seriously the injunction: 'Bear *fruit* in keeping with *repentance*.' (Matt 3:8) They might have shown a tad more humility and grace.

In both cases the followers of Jesus are reprimanded and once again reminded, everyone must repent and walk in the direction and ways of God rather than self. You have to change your *mind* human, and that will bring about a change of *attitudes* and *behaviour*. The message is that repentance is necessary and urgent. So scrap the self-justification, finger pointing and excuses!

(However, humility tells us even if we do repent and are safely in the Kingdom of God for eternity, we Christians do not have the monopoly on 'goodness' or 'being nice'... not a bit of it. Look at some of the extraordinary generosity of time and resources being poured out for the Ukrainian refugees for example – these not all Christians. But we see the image of God in these people exercising His love. Of course goodness and niceness alone, good deeds are not enough. This will not see us into the Kingdom of God, it is by faith we are saved so a change of direction, repentance at the start of our journey with God is still necessary. It is all too easy to rely on human judgement of goodness, judgement which is fundamentally flawed. Our tradition of confession each week continues to keep us on the right track.)

Both Jesus and later in His name, Paul, also draw attention to the need for thinking corporately, of corporate change not just me in my small space alone. What we do affects others, and our actions together are a powerful witness.

(Paul:

- 1) Don't fall foul of temptation and cause others to wobble in their walk with God. Clearly in Corinth there was an issue of sexual immorality.*
- 2) Don't sink into idolatry, putting something or someone before God, and cause others to slide away from worshipping and depending on God.*
- 3) Don't grumble (the reminder each time is the people of the Exodus), no point in whingeing – we are all subject to random stuff in this broken creation – and,*
- 4) Don't think 'I'm alright Jack' but, be careful of pride and arrogance attitudes that cause others to stumble.)*

None of us are exempt from catastrophe and suffering – we need to keep right with God, be aware of our need of Him, keep encouraging others in their walk even in the midst of trials and temptations, as frankly, we will all die physically at some point anyway! So what are we responsible for?

Do you remember, of course you do, the Tsunami of Boxing day 2004? A group I was facilitating with study had a long struggle with this – the agonizing suffering and loss. But we surfed the commentators, thought and prayed and we came to the conclusion that yes, there were things that needed to be learned and changed to reduce the dreadful loss of life in a future event. *No* it was not divine retribution but a result of broken creation – but what really mattered, what we are responsible for, is how we *respond*. Certainly like those with the Ukrainian refugees, giving, going, hosting etc. **And**, making sure we were right with God and had a clear gospel message of hope to offer.

So in our Gospel text with Jesus, sin is NOT the root of suffering per se for the Galileans at the hands of brutal Pilate, sin is not necessarily the root of the deaths of those under the falling tower. 'Stuff happens', creation groans and we are vulnerable. The point is, are you ready? And never mind about somebody else you might recall – YOU repent, it is necessary says Jesus.

Again whilst we were pondering suffering after the Tsunami, we agreed that personal sin, wrong decisions and action does cause suffering for us; smoking for instance – poor health, cancer, death – but is that divine retribution (as Jesus hearers had been schooled to think)?

It may be that the behaviour of others has harmed us. Dangerous driving, greedy landlords offering poor but expensive housing, power hungry national leaders....? Suffering is a *consequence* of such terrible decisions, lousy attitudes, bad actions against us. Is that divine retribution? I think not. But maybe we want to reflect on how we can influence others for good rather than bad attitudes and actions.

Finally, the falling tower of Siloam, the Tsunami, earthquakes etc – is that divine retribution. A theological discussion to be had here I think! After all, why *is* creation broken and subject to disasters?

But that is not the point being made here. In this life we are not going to be calamity free, and we are subject to a physical cessation of life sometime and somehow. We are warned, time as it is also will end, there will be change, so we need to be concerned about the possible destruction of our *souls* – are we ready now? For sure it would be best if we stopped pointing fingers and making excuses. We should be in the season of Lent especially, searching our own hearts, hearing the urgency in the voice of Jesus Christ and again through Paul. Are we right with God? Have we truly turned to Him in repentance and faith? Are we bearing fruit – is it recognisable in us that God is at work...are we transformed by the power of His Spirit in us?

Gosh, this is sounding like a real tub thumping rant! Well, in a way it is and I make no excuse for that – God is love – but we see no sentimentality and flannel in that love but a tough yearning for us, each one of us and together to be close to God and not be lost – it is a very strong warning.

But, we also see *mercy*. We are blessed at the end with this delightful parable of the fig tree that failed to bear fruit. Barren, a waste of decent soil and space. I don't know about you but there are times when I *feel* like that fig tree. I'm aware of my own excuses and failures.

Yet the character who is representing the God of mercy says 'leave the tree for another year, I'll feed it and care for it...one more year. Can we repent and receive that amazing mercy and love. Can we say that of someone who has harmed us, who has not expressed goodness to us? Can we draw on the power of God to offer forgiveness, mercy and love...for one more year? Can we love even our enemies? Can we do this together and present a united witness to those who don't yet know what a difference Jesus Christ makes?

'Bear fruit in keeping with repentance' both individually and together. Bear fruit that will feed and bless others, show your repentance is real. Change your mind, change your heart, your action, your attitude, for love of God and love of neighbours, and confidently leave time and judgement to God – in His mercy, He will do the rest.

Amen

Blessing

Christ give us grace to grow in holiness, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all – now and in eternity. Amen.