

Real Change

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Second Sunday in Lent—21 February 2016
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Luke 13.1-9

Introduction

What a parcel of themes this Gospel has: the fragility of human life, the fallibility and sinfulness of religion, and the possibilities for change. Each of these themes is worth reflecting on during Lent.

The passage today is a part of Luke that begins at 9.51 that tells of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and it concludes a section (12.1-13.9) that begins in crisis as the leaders decide to stalk Jesus and look for ways to bring him down (11.53-54).

Jesus is a prophet to his own people who were living under the Romans and looking for God's coming kingdom to throw off the colonising yoke. As we have noted often some sought salvation through violence, some through fleeing to the desert, some in tight religious restriction and some in compromise with the powers.

Jesus puts another option: God's saving, renewing dominion has come in Jesus and his ministry. Turn your mind in that direction, stop now and change agendas. Those debates set the tone for the Gospel today.

The fragility of life 13.1-5

A voice from the crowd sets the stage for everything that follows. Apparently Pilate slaughtered a group of Galilean pilgrims in the temple area so that their blood mingled with the blood of slaughtered animals being prepared for sacrifice: A terrible slaughter and religious pollution all at once.

Pilate continually confronted the Jews and their sensibilities. We have no other report of this particular incident but we do know that such bloodshed was not uncommon. He introduced Roman effigies into Jerusalem, causing a riot and a march on Caesarea. His troops killed a group of Samaritans climbing Mt. Gerizim. He seized temple funds to build an aqueduct. He was unpleasant, unpopular and unscrupulous.

Life under Pilate could be dangerous, fragile and short. It is a microcosm of daily life of people around the world. We think of events in Syria, Iraq, Turkey.

In our Litany we pray the words:

'From famine and disaster; from violence, murder and dying unprepared, good Lord, deliver us.'

Even in the west, even in a country as safe as ours, these words strike a chord, and chill our hearts because of their realism. In a society that has tried to shield us from such shocks it takes little to remind us of the fragility of human life and human society.

Jesus rejects the notion that somehow we could interpret violence and random accidents as the punishment of God (1-5). Jesus reads their bringing of this report to him about Pilate's action as a form of self-justification that expresses the human view that "they deserve it" and of course "we do not".

Judgment in his interlocutors' view is reserved for those whose sin sets them apart from "us". Jesus does not reject the view that disobedience to God's love and mercy will finally lead to

judgment. He simply rejects the notion that those who encounter disaster and misfortune have been specially marked out by God. They have not.

And the same applied to the unfortunates on whom some falling masonry from a defence tower in Jerusalem had wreaked such havoc. They were no worse than other residents of the city.

Jesus does not take the argument further at this point because he has something else in mind. But he does break the nexus between sin and calamity and thus opens up the discussion although he does not pursue it. There were more pressing matters on his mind.

There are two questions hanging in the air as Jesus digests this shocking news. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem at the head of a group of Galileans. Does he intend to continue his journey? Is he not afraid of what might happen to him and his group of pilgrims?

But there is another question in the air, too. What does this mean? Is this the beginning of something worse?

Jesus response to this is two-fold.

And his first is that religion is dangerously fallible and sinful 13.5 When we read Jesus response “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did” (5) we often read it as though he was speaking a warning about perishing in some sort of eternal hell. He is not doing that. He is instead speaking in the here and the now.

Jesus was a prophet who came along and issued a warning. The warning was about their crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome. This wild attempt to overthrow colonial rule was undergirded by religion.

The direction that their religion had taken was disastrous. Religion was meant to support the mission that God had given to be his light to the world. Their religion was meant to provide the solidarity and sense of identity that would lead to the establishment of God’s justice, God’s mercy, and God’s righteousness among people. Instead it provoked hatred of the foreigner, ideas of racial purity and cultural superiority.

Jesus called them back to their ancient truths and he warned them that if they pursued their present path then they would themselves suffer under Roman swords and they would die under the collapse of defence masonry as the Romans set about destroying them.

Jesus speaks of a judgment that can come to us every day of our lives as God addresses us with the call of Jesus to follow the kingdom in all we do. It comes to us often in the things that take us aback, bring us up short, that call attention to some action in our lives that causes others grief and pain. Indeed, also causes us pain.

Religion is not an unmitigated good. It can be captured by ideology and lose its way. Its danger is that, because of its social significance in identity formation, that it forms people in such a way that become different from their roots. Jesus warned the people that they had lost their roots in God’s vision for them s a light for the world. They thought of themselves as the light. They would defend the light with violence and hatred.

Jesus says that if the hearers did not repent from their violence they could expect that they would experience the full effects of Roman violence in murder and destruction. Sadly, it all came too true. It would happen forty years later.

Luke uses Jesus' words to remind the church that we are vulnerable to exactly the same problem. We do not learn quickly but there is hope. The way back is repentance; and to that we turn in the parable of the fig tree.

We must heed the call of Jesus to repentance 13.6-9

The parable of the fig tree is both humorous and sinister. It reminds me of the advice given on a gardening show. If the tree does not fruit then go to the shed, sharpen up the chainsaw, take it out start it up in front of the tree and give it a good showing. Then wait.

The hope in this parable is that no matter how unfruitful we may be God is still willing to pour in sustenance and give us a chance to change and grow. The point of the parable is that God withholds judgment, not because we are pious, holy or some other self-reported religious characteristic, but because of God's mercy and grace. The tree is unfruitful and yet still he intercedes with the owner of the fig tree to let it live. Mercy characterises God, not capricious destruction.

Herein lies beautiful image for repentance. Repentance is a response to God's nurture, God's call to return to the kingdom of mercy of and justice. The fruits of mercy and compassion, not hatred and violence, are nurtured by God's word and God's spirit.

I think one of the most evocative portrayals of repentance in the NT is the parable commonly known as the prodigal son. The son is long forgiven by the father who only longs for the son to come home. The father has no bitterness only love. The son finds judgment and salvation in the pig pen. Judgment; he wakes up to his situation among the unsuspecting pigs. Salvation; he goes home. Repentance is simply getting up out of the pig pen. Repentance is coming home to a warm welcome to a whole new life.

So no more pig pen, only fruit bearing like the renewed tree. Fruit bearing characterises disciples (3.7-9, 6.43-45, 8.4-15). Fruit bearing arises out of repentance and the stories in the Gospel tell us what the fruit is.

Jesus called his own people back to their roots and away from the lunacy of the ideology that attracted them and that finally destroyed them; out of their pig pen. The Spirit calls us back from the ideologies of hate and violence, from xenophobia, all underwritten by consumerism.

Conclusion

What is God calling us to?

Certainly the main vision has not changed; to be God's reflecting light in the world. How have we been diverted from that? So here are some questions for Lenten meditation.

Are we like a tree not bearing fruit even though God is feeding us? Are we listening to the word of God to us? How can we be bearers of the kingdom of mercy, joy, peace and reconciliation in our world, in our time? Can these questions become our meditation for Lent?