

A prayer drawn from Isaiah Chapter 55 verse 7

O Lord, may we return to you, that you may have mercy on us, for you are our God, and you will abundantly pardon. **Amen**

Sermon 23 March 2025

Readings

Isaiah 55.1–9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run
to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13.1–9

There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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?' ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

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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. ⁷So 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?" ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

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SERMON

Some bible passages, taken out of the flow of the narrative, can be perplexing and disturbing. And for me, the Gospel reading we have just heard is one of those passages. It is very short, but in nine verses we are presented first with two human disasters, a seemingly harsh response from Jesus, and then on to an apparently unrelated parable about a non-fruiting fig tree.

We too easily overlook these difficult sections of scripture and instead return to the passages which we have come to love. For example, the warmth of the welcome in Isaiah's poetry is compelling:

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price”¹.

These words are profoundly evocative, speaking to the perennial human hunger and thirst for our inner emptiness to be filled. Not surprisingly these passages become favourites, often echoed in our hymns. We'll sing shortly the much beloved “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”, in which its author, James Greenleaf Whittier, draws upon scriptural words such as these in the beautiful phrases of the third verse.

“Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace”.

These lines resonate with Isaiah's promise that spiritual nourishment is ours for the keeping, a nourishment which sets our lives in a beautifully configured and peaceful order.

But let's now return to the problem posed by those more challenging texts. We can take encouragement from the writer to the Hebrews who wrote “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword..it discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart”². This is central to our faith as Christians. We trust in both Word and Sacrament. There is a power within

¹ Isaiah 55:1

² Hebrews 4:12

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scripture, even isolated and difficult passages, which is just waiting to be released, and often that power is not apparent upon a superficial reading, but instead will only emerge as the listener rests in faith with the individual words and also the stories which have been told through them.

So let us take some time over our difficult Gospel text set for today. Some innocent temple worshippers from Galilee had been massacred by Pilate's soldiers as they presented their offerings for sacrifice. In an event prefiguring Jesus' own crucifixion, these people had made the 100 mile journey on foot to Jerusalem, presumably for the Passover, and were slaughtered in their most holy place

Local people must have been both deeply shocked and terrified by the desecration of the temple. What atrocity would Pilate order next? These same horrors challenge us even now as we learn daily of the slaughter of innocent people and children in the news. In holy places, hospitals, schools and homes. Alongside the political question 'what can be done about this oppressive rule?' we ask ourselves the theological questions: 'how and why did God let this happen? What had these people done to deserve disaster landing upon them? '

Jesus does not enter into debate except to make it clear that this slaughter was nothing to do with the sin of victims. Moreover, he points to an accident where many died under the collapsed tower and explains this too could have happened to anyone.

But then he delivers that shocking, seemingly heartless, message.. repeated twice..."unless you repent you will perish as they did".

This is where we need to grapple with the passage in the faith it has something of hope to offer us.

It firstly helps to understand the context of the passage which comes at the beginning of the second half of Luke's gospel. In the first half of the Gospel we learn how Jesus's ministry after his baptism has been gaining momentum. His first disciples are the fishermen of Galilee who witness Jesus commanding a

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breath-takingly huge catch of fish...a demonstration of the abundant life which is theirs if they lay down their nets and follow him³. So right at the start of his ministry...Jesus demonstrates that he is all about life, and not perishing. The overflowing gift of the catch of fish, basic sustenance for the Galileans, resonates with that promise of water, wine, milk and rich food in God's promise as recounted by Isaiah. Jesus is offering abundant life for the taking.

And in keeping with this promise of welcome and abundance, Jesus astonishes the people in his early ministry with healing miracles, often focussing on people living on the margins of society whose lives are made anew as diseases and demons are banished⁴.

But, by the time of our Gospel reading Jesus has begun his fateful journey to Jerusalem from Galilee⁵ in which he is being followed, in addition to his faithful disciples, by huge crowds of fascinated people⁶. In the preceding chapters Luke presents a mood change, from excitement surrounding the bold miracle worker, to the seriousness of Jesus' central message. There is indeed abundant life to be had, but not in the easy life we might be angling for. Abundant life in Christ comes through changing our direction, and taking a path which is likely to involve trial and tribulation.

The Greek word translated as repentance is metanoia, literally meaning a 'change of heart and mind'. However, the equivalent Hebrew word is שׁוּב "shuv", meaning 'to turn around.' This turning, repentance, means daily to reorient ourselves so that we follow His voice, His way of being. For Christ not being on this path is the opposite of life; it is deathly. But to be on his path, the path of life and abundance, the path of eternal life, entails a profound exchange. We need to let go of our own personal security to allow for the generosity of living for others which is modelled by Christ himself. This is the way of the cross.

³ Luke 5:1-11

⁴ e.g., Luke 5:12-16

⁵ Luke 9:51

⁶ Luke 12:1 The crowds were in their 1000s

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Jesus offers these two disasters as a wake-up call to all the people who are understandably disturbed by the vulnerability of human existence. Wake up. Repent. Change direction...although these people have died shocking deaths, but mortal death awaits us all sooner or later...and then comes the final judgement. Change direction now. Follow me now, before its too late. Don't waste time speculating about politics or even upon where God was in those disasters (as Isaiah says, God's ways are not our ways), just focus on getting your own lives in order.

Now the fig tree story starts to make sense. The first Gospel readers would have understood the fig from the Old Testament as a symbol of God's blessing. A tree not bearing fruit was a metaphor used by both Isaiah and Jeremiah for a people who had fallen away from God and turned to ways of injustice and unrighteousness. And yet in this parable of the unfruiting fig tree, the gardener pleads with the owner to give it one more chance....he will dig around the roots and give it some manure. The people of God who need to repent, cannot do this on their own. And we are the same. Just like the fig tree, despite our continual going astray, we are being offered help by the divine vinedresser, Christ himself. It is by Grace that Christ will dig up the dry resistant ground in which we have become stuck, and feed us with the spiritual fertiliser we need to live lives of abundance bearing the fruits of righteousness and justice.

Our efforts in Lent always present what seems to me a central conundrum in the Christian calling, it's a problem in which there is a hidden gift. Surely in Lent **we** are charged to do the work? To focus on putting our lives a bit more in order. To pray, give alms, fast. To repent. To seek the direction of Christ. To be obedient to his voice. It can so easily appear as a gruelling prospect...but the hidden gift is this. We can only begin that process through the Grace of the divine gardener, Jesus Christ. And the good news is when in response to that Grace, a stirring of our hearts, when we start to change direction, to repent, we are then be further blessed by more Grace. As Isaiah has written, "let us return to the Lord (let us repent) so that he may have mercy on us (bless us with his Grace, with his manure). This is why Christ promised his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Once we start facing the right

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direction, inclining our ears to the voice of the Lord, and choosing the way of the cross, this difficult path of saying no to self, it becomes gradually over time, more natural and easy, joyful even.

And so “repent or perish” is indeed a wake-up call. But it is Christ’s invitation to put on that easy yoke, turn daily to His ways and be ready to receive the blessing of his Grace. This does not make us immune to injury nor disaster, but it nevertheless comes with the promise of the mysterious over-abundant life of the Kingdom in which we will be enabled, through Grace, like the fig tree in the parable, to give back to our loving creator, to all of creation, in fruitfulness. Into eternity. **Amen.**