

Year C Lent 3 220319

Isaiah 55: 1-9

1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

Luke 13: 1-9

## Consequences

Well, I feel as if today's gospel reading demolishes one of my favourite sayings. When people say to me, "Is it alright to ask a question"? I always respond with, "There is no such thing as daft question." I much prefer people to ask something that is bothering them rather than to hold back, worrying that the question in their mind might show them up to be lacking in understanding that everyone else already knows, or in some way shows they haven't grasped a simple fact that everyone **must** know.

I wonder if it puzzled you why this gospel story seems to have two distinct parts? The first part seems to be questioning why bad things happen to good people. The people were asking, "why?" The first part ends with Jesus telling his followers to repent. We are left scratching our heads wondering what his followers have done wrong that requires repentance.

The second part of the gospel reading reports a parable Jesus tells his followers about whether a fig tree should be dug up or not.

So let us start with the first part...

Jesus is being questioned by some of his wider group of followers about why bad things happen to good people. They cite the killing of people by Pilate and the loss of life when the tower at Siloam collapsed. They are clearly questioning whether the individuals' lives

that were cut short had deserved to die; whether they had sinned in some way and God had decided to punish them.

Most of us like to ask questions to do our utmost to understand the world, to create connections, causes and effects. We like there to be as much certainty in our world as possible. Some people also like to say that God is in control, all things happen for a reason.

At a personal level I experienced well-meaning comments after my wife died, that was evidence of a similar way of thinking. So many people said, “She didn’t deserve to die”. I appreciated each person who reached out to offer a form of condolence, but part of me wanted to shout out something along the lines of, “No one ‘deserves’ to die; there is no ‘God equation’ that decides that some deserve to die” and others don’t deserve to die. I reject that formulation entirely. If someone doesn’t deserve to die it must mean someone else does deserve to die, and that God has a hand in that.

Jesus clearly balked at the assumptions being made, the model for life that some of his followers had adopted. The understanding that bad things happen to bad people was so wrong that Jesus told them to repent. The call to repent here is exactly what the word means – metanoia – to change our minds; not just for that instant, but to throw out a particular model of how God and the world works, and to replace it with the true model.

Jesus is instructing them to completely change their world-view of how God operates in our world.

We then come to the second part of this gospel reading; the parable of the fig tree. A poor fig tree, minding its own business, developing roots and trying its best to survive in poor soil and no doubt challenging, dry conditions. We have a land owner, probably not

someone who lives anywhere near the property, who is detached from the garden's day to day life. The landowner sees the fig tree purely as a unit of production; and to his eyes, a totally unproductive waste of space. He has a dismissive contempt for it. If only the fig tree had produced some fruit then he would have seen some value in it. Harshly, the landowner wants it cut down. And yet, the fig tree may hardly have been mature enough to flower and fruit. The landowner had come every year for the past three years expecting fruit from it and went away without any.

Thankfully, we have the example of the gardener, who intercedes on behalf of the fig tree. The gardener is not someone viewing events at a distance; is not someone who is lacking in compassion and hope. By the very nature of the gardener's work, he or she has laboured and cared for the tree; has got soil under fingernails and has dirty hands from getting intimately involved in all the plants in the garden. The gardener's work is messy business; it is one of planting seeds, nurturing and hoping, sheltering and protecting, pruning to encourage healthy growth, applying manure and compost, and watering. The gardener gathers all the off-cuts, all the bits others may think have no value, and invests time in turning them into nourishing compost.

This parable illustrates the massive gulf between the dispassionate land-owner, interested in units of production, viewing everything in terms of an economic return on investment and the gardener who is intimately involved in all aspects of the garden, who sees hope and possibility for life, who knows how to give nourishment and food to the plants to achieve a wonderful flourishing and eventually a harvest.

This parable challenges us to act in this world in the same way as the gardener does. To not be afraid of getting our hands dirty, in

investing in feeding and nurturing something that perhaps may not yield fruit immediately, but is worth making an effort to nurture a fruitful life; to not be worried about whether the care and attention does result in an abundance of figs or whatever 'fruitful' means for the love and compassion we give. The gardener saw life and hope in the fig tree; the gardener refused to give up and only see destruction and death as the solution.

The gardener is a model of generous and perhaps risky love and care. The gardener may not be able to achieve a fruiting fig tree despite all the care and attention spent on it, but that doesn't stop the gardener from making the effort.

The gardener model is a challenge of us all here today. How can we be more like the gardener in our lives? What messy 'getting our hands dirty' work of God's kingdom, of loving our neighbour, should we be involved in? There may be a risk our efforts won't produce fruit, but that shouldn't stop us trying. If we are just a distant spectator, like the landowner, we become dispassionate and uncaring observers, tending to harsher impersonal judgments, viewing the world in a dualistic 'them and us' style, that completely runs counter to Jesus' message about the kingdom of God, where all are equal and all are loved.

I have been humbled this week talking to several people who are working through the issues for them of registering to host a Ukrainian refugee family. This is being like the gardener in the parable. My response to hearing one possible offer of accommodation was to say that I am sure the congregations in the churches in Penicuik would respond generously to any needs to help provide furniture, and also more than that, to set and provide other sorts of support needed by a refugee family arriving in a strange and foreign land. It was easy for me to say it, perhaps risky when I

personally could not commit to meeting all the needs. However, having seen how willing people have been to 'get their hands dirty' and get involved in the past, I am sure that it isn't that risky. I am glad I live in a community of 'gardeners', willing to get involved. Long may it be so.

And so, finally, how do the two parts of this gospel reading come together. Well, an insightful commentary I read pointed out that Jesus was contrasting those who ask a question that really should not have been asked, who wanted to spend time philosophising about good and evil, whereas the gardener wasn't philosophising; the gardener was being active, challenging and dealing with the realities of the world in the here and now. We can spend too much time doing the thinking when God is crying out for us to notice what needs done and then taking action to bring glimpses of God's kingdom to people in need today.

This gospel reading challenges us to be like the gardener, to be reaching out to humanity, with love, care and compassion to all who are suffering. That is the task of the church. That is our task, sadly, so much more urgent and immediate today than it has been for ages. Refugees across the world do not need us to work out if they 'deserve' their situation, they need us to show God's love in action.

What can we all be doing in God's garden today?