

Sunday 28 Feb 2016 Lent 3 Isaiah 55. 1-9, Psalm 63, 1Cor 10. 1-13, Luke 13.1-9

This is my last Sunday with you. I have to go back to my church in London. I have really enjoyed my time here – meeting and making new friends and exploring a city new to us. Hamburg, being a big international port, has the feeling of being open to the world. And Thomas Becket, as a church, also reflects the same feeling – open to the world – a congregation made up of many nationalities, a place of welcome and shelter for many. You have been so welcoming and generous to us. We will be sorry to say goodbye.

The background to today's gospel story is that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, when people come to tell him about an incident in which some Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem were slaughtered in the temple by Herod's soldiers, so that their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices they were making. They probably intended this as a warning to Jesus, who was on his way to Jerusalem with a party of Galileans. So they were walking into a dangerous place where they could suffer the same fate as the other Galileans. Indeed, nowhere was now safe for Jesus, since behind was Galilee, where Herod was wanting to kill him.

As we know, Jesus was determined to get to Jerusalem, so he ignores their warning and picks up on another theme – the then current understanding that disaster falls on people as a punishment for their sins. We really don't have that understanding today, that God punishes people through violence and disasters. Although it is clear that all behaviour has consequences. Eating, drinking, smoking too much, all have negative consequences for our health. Persistently being critical, mean and unkind will leave us isolated, without friends. When people avoid paying the taxes they owe, the state's finances are undermined, and so on and so on. All behaviour has consequences for good or ill.

Jesus is making a different point. Those Galileans and the 18 people of Siloam, on whom the tower fell down and crushed them, do you think that that happened because they were sinful? I tell you, absolutely not! They were no more sinful than you and unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way. This last phrase, 'in the same way', is thought to refer to the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans some 40 years later, in which many died defending the Temple or were crushed under the buildings as they crashed to the ground. It is a warning of the disaster to come, if they do not, as a nation, turn from the wrong way they are going and seek the way of peace and justice, which he is offering them. It is the same message as we heard last week.

'Unless you repent.' Repentance is a difficult subject to preach on, and yet in Lent it is unavoidable, it recurs all the time. Jesus gets round this difficulty, as so often, by telling a story, the Parable of the Fig Tree.

'A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any, so he said to the gardener, 'For three years now, I have been coming to look for fruit on this tree and have not found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?

The fig tree was good for providing shade and it was good for the grapes. In the Hebrew

Bible, it was a symbol of peace and prosperity and also of fruitfulness, as it bore two crops a year. Of course, if it never bears fruit it is useless, just taking up space and depleting the soil. The gardener says, 'Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good. If not, then cut it down.'

This story could be rendered as Jesus saying, 'for three years now, I have gone around teaching and preaching – hoping to see the fruit of repentance and return to God in people's lives, but there has been no response. These people are destined for disaster.'

Or the interpretation could be that God is the owner of the vineyard, who has been patient with his people over so many years, and Jesus is the gardener, who has come to give the fig tree one more chance by tending it, watering it and fertilizing it. Jesus is the mercy of God in allowing time for repentance, giving us a second chance.

The point of the parable was to tell people that they could not go on indefinitely living in a way that is displeasing to God, without incurring disaster. That is the challenge to us in Lent – to look at the ways in which our lives are not pleasing to God and to turn away from those things. In the words of Isaiah, let us 'Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him, while he is near.'

But this is not only or mainly a call to repentance for individuals. It was a call to the whole nation of Israel, and it is a call to us, as the church. The church is not just a place providing shelter, like the fig tree, though that is also valuable. It is also expected to produce fruit. Otherwise it is like the barren fig tree, taking up space, using resources, and producing nothing – a waste of space as you might say – and we know that uselessness invites disaster. So are we bearing fruit for God's kingdom?

I would say that this is a wonderful church, and you are all wonderful people, kind welcoming and generous. But this is also a time for you of transition and uncertainty, while you are looking for a new permanent chaplain. This is a time you could use to ask yourselves, 'What is the vision of this church going forward? What fruits do we, as a church want to produce? This is a time to reflect on what God wants of you, what is your particular calling as a church, at this time, in this place? And a time to pray for the right leader to help you realise that vision and produce those fruits.'

I pray for God's blessing on you now and in the weeks and months to come, and we will go on praying for you in London in the church there. Amen