

Sermon 24th March 2019

Luke 13:1-9 Isaiah 55:1-9 Psalms 63:1-8

Let us pray

Loving God as we come to your living word, open our hearts and our minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Introduction

As I prepared for this week's sermon so many questions kept popping up in my head. And not just relating to the passage we have read, but linked to the terrible atrocity of a few weeks ago in Christchurch, New Zealand. It doesn't take much effort these days to bump into tragedy. You don't have to look very far to see and hear bad news. In the information age in which we live we are more aware now than ever of tragic circumstances and situations that take place, not just in our own little corner but all around the world, accessed through constant media news bulletins and the computer. The list of bad news is long: conflict and war overseas; hunger affecting millions; shootings resulting in the deaths of innocent people, and the list could go on and on. And these are only the public tragedies. We don't hear or know about the personal ones which people experience and are weighed down by.

And we find ourselves easily asking the question "Why?" or perhaps "Why God?" Why those people going about their daily routine killed in Christchurch, New Zealand? Why those innocent children a few weeks ago in Lagos, Nigeria who died when a school building and apartments collapsed on top of them? People ask moral questions about human tragedies that involve loss of human lives because the scale of the human suffering is so great that life seems to be without meaning and the world seems so God-forsaken. How do we respond to these or even personal calamities? What kind of questions do we ask ourselves and ask of God? It may sound something like, where was God when that happened? How do we reconcile the impact these calamities make on the way we feel and react as we bring them to God in prayer?

These thoughts, feelings and questions are not new. In our reading from Luke similar questions were directed to Jesus by the people. Two tragic incidents had occurred. One, a very brutal massacre, caused by Pilate whom we know from historians was regarded as a cruel and sadistic Roman governor, when a number of Galileans were massacred as they offered their sacrifices in the temple at Jerusalem, horrifically described as "mingling their blood with that of their sacrifices". The other referred to the untimely and accidental death of eighteen innocent bystanders when the tower of Siloam, probably part of the old wall around Jerusalem, collapsed and killed them all. What kind of questions might those

present have asked? Why did God allow this? What kind of answers were the people expecting to hear? How did Jesus respond?

To try to answer some of these it helps to understand that it was a generally accepted assumption at that time stemming from Old Testament traditions that physical suffering and sinfulness were connected and that suffering and death were a result of sin, whereas righteousness would result in life and peace. This assumption of judgement seems to be implied by those reporting the incidents to Jesus, that the Galileans and the unfortunate inhabitants of Jerusalem were killed because they were sinners, a similar perspective in the Old Testament taken by Job's friends as they tried to comfort yet justify his misfortunes, and also reflected in John ch.9:2 when Jesus was questioned about the blind man and whose sin it was that resulted in him being born blind. There were also perhaps some parallels being made by the people about Jesus and the Galileans. They were from Galilee and so was Jesus; they were in Jerusalem and that is where Jesus was going; they were murdered by Pilate and Jesus also knew he would be put to death by Pilate. So logically it followed that if they were sinners then so must Jesus be! In his response Jesus addresses this problem and rejects the notion that when calamities came upon people it was proof that they were exceptionally sinful. He emphasised that individual sin does not equate to suffering but rather he emphasises that the Galileans and the others killed by the tower were no worse sinners than anyone else and urges the people in the light of what has happened to repent whether they have been involved in a tragedy or not. Repentance in the Hebrew means to "turn back" and in the Greek to "change one's mind or attitude or mind set". They were not to regard those who perished as any more guilty than themselves. God did not murder the Galileans- people did on the orders of Pilate and the tower may have collapsed due to bad construction or possible decay over the years. It is people who do bad things, not God. The Galileans and also Jesus were murdered by unrepentant people but the good news is that Jesus raises up to new life. Jesus' response called for a change of mind and attitude. If they turn back to God in repentance, then he will raise them up, just as God raised Jesus up and raises us up to new life in him.

Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree as an example to expand on this point. The fig tree did not bear any fruit even after three years so the owner decided it should be cut down. The vineyard worker pleads for it to be spared for another year with the hope that special care and attention will produce fruit, but if not it will have to go.

This story made me think about a rose bush, planted in our garden, which is nearly 66 years old – and it looks it! It was planted when the house was built. But now it has a gnarled appearance with only a few branches and shoots coming out of the top which bear a few beautiful white roses every year. Yet every year I am tempted to dig it out and plant a fresh, new rose bush but something stops me. I'll give it one more chance I say to myself and I feed it with extra fertilizer and tend it carefully, because it has a special

meaning to us - it was planted by Alan's father. Perhaps if I just wait another year it will miraculously produce a harvest of white roses! Well we will wait and see...

We are like the fig tree. We don't all produce the fruit we could. But God does not condemn us for that. He is exceptionally patient with us. He wants us to grow. He longs for change to happen. So he feeds us with His Word and waters us with his Holy Spirit so that we will bear fruit for him in our lives, such as mercy, love, peace and forgiveness. God is a God of second chances – he wants to raise us up to new life in Christ, to turn to him and repent and bear the fruit of loving and being at peace with one another.

Conclusion

This passage clearly teaches through the words of Jesus that tragedies occur whether intentional or accidental caused by the imperfections of people and of our world around us. Yet how do we respond to these, especially the recent tragedy in Christchurch? How do we see God act in its aftermath? In truth we find it difficult at times as we want a God who will bring retribution for atrocities and tragedies, not a God who in Christ washes feet, who loves his enemies and instead of getting even with them stretched out on a cross and died for our sins. God is a God of justice but he is also a God who is full of mercy. In Christ he came not condemn us but to save us; and so he longs to see us bearing fruit just like the fig tree, in our lives for him. He wants people to turn to him in repentance, to change their mindset and become loving, peaceful, merciful and just towards one another. He wants to raise us up in to new life in him.

I'd like to finish with a quote from John Newton. Although involved in the slave trade in his younger years and even after his conversion, he renounced and regretted this in later years and vigorously campaigned with William Wilberforce to abolish The African slave trade. Here are two of his many famous quotes which reflect God's mercy, forgiveness and grace towards each one of us-

"God works Powerfully but for the most part gently and gradually"

"Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see."

Prayer

Now to Him who has the power to make you stand firm, to the only wise God through Jesus Christ, be glory for endless ages.

Amen.

