

“Bad Stuff Happens”

A sermon on Luke 13:1-9

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Probably all of us have cried out at some time or another, “What have I done to deserve this?”

Occasionally there is an obvious answer - if you drove home blind drunk then we can all tell you what you did to deserve getting smashed up in a car accident. Actions have consequences, and there's not much point complaining.

But if you were the one standing innocently on the street corner when the car driven by a drunk person ran into you, then there doesn't seem to be any connection. But still we cry out, “What have I done to deserve this?”

Why do we say such a thing? Because we have all soaked up the view of the old covenant of Moses, “If you obey the commands of the Lord your God, then you will prosper and God will bless you, but if you disobey and refuse to listen then you will be destroyed.” And then we turn it round so it says, “I am not prospering, I am being destroyed, therefore I have displeased God and I am being punished.”

It almost makes sense. But we are a people who say that in Jesus Christ we have seen the true face of God, and as we heard this morning in the Gospel reading, Jesus disputed that view of things.

The people approached Jesus to tell him of the murder of the Galilean worshippers. Judging by Jesus' response, they apparently assumed that the only way such a thing could happen was that the victims were evil people who deserved God's punishment. In seeking confirmation of this view, they are seeking an assurance that the world is an orderly safe place so long as you do the right thing, and an assurance that the fact that they weren't victims themselves was evidence that God was pleased with them.

They were not the only people to ever come to Jesus with such a question. The disciples once saw a man who had been blind since birth and asked Jesus, "Whose sin caused his blindness, his own or his parents'?" On that occasion, Jesus said, "It was nobody's sin." On this occasion he says, "Do you think that that proves they were worse sinners than anybody else? I tell you, No!"

Jesus denies the doctrine that leads to these questions, and refutes the suggestion that God causes human misery to punish us. He also turns the question back on the askers and says, "But I tell you that unless you repent, you're fate will be similar."

Logically speaking, that doesn't make great sense. But I think what Jesus is trying to do is to shift their focus. He's saying that you can spend a lot of time trying to work out the extent of other people's sin and never take a good look at yourself. He's saying that if you're looking for the seeds of destruction, take a look into your own heart, because if you can't face up to the evil there and root it out, then you'll never get anywhere dealing with the evil out there in the rest of the world.

And then Jesus goes on to tell a parable about God's mercy and God's judgment – what I referred to in my sermon two weeks ago as "The Two Big Pictures of God". The imagery of the parable would have been well known to his listeners. There were a number of vineyard parables in the Hebrew Bible, and the vineyard always represented the people of Israel, and a fig tree in the vineyard stood for the leadership of the people of Israel. So when Jesus says the fig tree in the vineyard is not bearing any fruit, everybody would have known what he meant, especially when it is in response to questions about other people's sin. He's saying, "If you want to talk about who needs to repent, take a look at your own role in the community. What sort of fruit are you bearing?"

In his usual style, Jesus does not make this just a parable of God's judgment. He doesn't just write off unfruitful leadership. He says that judgment would certainly call for the tree to be chopped down, but that mercy pleads for it to have another chance. God's mercy asks for a reprieve and promises to redouble the efforts at nurturing the tree so as to give it every opportunity of producing fruit.

Jesus is doing two very interesting things here. Firstly he is emphasizing the priority of God's mercy over the inevitability of judgment. He doesn't deny the possibility of judgment, of the tree being eventually chopped down, but he does say that it will be given every opportunity to avoid that fate, the best nurture and care.

And secondly he is redefining repentance. Repentance means turning around, and we tend to focus on the life we turn away from. The New Testament Greek word translated as repentance is [*metanoia*] which means “a transformation”. It is the root for metamorphosis – that long word you learnt at school when learning what happens to a caterpillar when it becomes a butterfly, and just like a butterfly, the emphasis is on what it turns into, not what it turned from. So when Jesus says “Repent,” he is not so much saying, “Turn from sin,” he's saying, “Turn to God.”

Jesus is describing a God who is not really interested in doing a count of each sinful action, but who calls us to fulfil our role as co-creators with God. That was a major part of what I was describing two weeks ago. And if that is who God is, then repentance is a decision to join God in producing love and peace and justice and actively living out the rule of God in the world.

There's a well-known phrase, two words only, one of which is a swear word, that I am sure most of you know, but if I used it standing up here some might be offended. A translation, using three words instead of two, would be, “Bad stuff happens”! It's a bit crass, but clear and simple. It's a philosophical shrug of the shoulders in the face of meaningless tragedy. It says, “Hey, don't try to explain it or understand it. There is no rhyme or reason sometimes. Bad stuff happens. It doesn't mean anything, it just happens.”

The tower of Siloam fell down and killed eighteen people. Tragedies like that are happening all the time, stories about them fill the media – and unfortunately, they even happen to us sometimes, or to people close to us. These are horrible things but you can't explain them. There is no reason why it happened to you and not someone else. Bad stuff happens. You'll drive yourself nuts if you try to work out how you deserved it or why you think God wanted it to happen to you.

What Jesus says to those trying to come to terms with these tragic situations is “Repent,” which certainly takes me by surprise, until I remind myself that he is not so much saying, “Turn from sin,” but, “Turn to God.”

And that can make sense in the midst of tragedy and suffering. God did not cause this, it just happened, but God can make something out of it. God can turn any death into the basis of a resurrection. But if we are to find that resurrection it is up to us to repent, that is to turn ourselves around and follow Jesus on the path that leads through suffering to new life. As it often said, the path that Jesus leads us on is not one that necessarily avoids suffering, but it is one that comes out on the other side of it.

A couple whose infant child died believes that God took their daughter because they'd decided not to have her baptized. A man with AIDS is told that God is taking revenge on him for being gay. In these and countless other ways, many have sought to explain misfortune by assuming that tragedies occur because we have done something to earn God's displeasure.

Tragedy happens. God doesn't cause it, but God's goodness is not thwarted by it. God is not going to let it prevent you from experiencing the love and goodness of God. However, God does understand when you are barren and unproductive because of what has been going on in your life. God's mercy will not allow the fig tree to be cut down just because it hasn't borne any fruit lately. God's mercy says, "Hey, maybe this tree needs a bit more love and care before we can expect much of it."

If you're just getting over a death in the family, or a relationship breakdown, or a psychiatric illness or something, God doesn't expect you to be busting your gut changing the world. There are going to be times in anyone's life when they have very little to give and they need a lot of care and nurture. And at those times the "economic rationalists" of this world will call for the axe because there are no figs on the tree, and productivity is the only measure of worth that they can see. But God is not "an economic rationalist" ... a bit of a "futures speculator" maybe, but not an "economic rationalist".

God knows whether you're able to put much into that task at present or not, and if not God will happily wait and give you all the care and nurture you require, but if you squander it and never grow, this parable is not a promise of an open cheque.

God is unbelievably good to us. God's goodness and love go far beyond any rational limits. God repeatedly pours out love and opportunity on those who appear to be lost causes. But it must be said, in fairness to the parable that Jesus told, that the possibility of the axe eventually getting the go ahead is still there. God's love is unconditional in that there are no requirements for eligibility, everyone receives God's love. But it is conditional in that there is a required response. We are required to respond to God's goodness by stepping out and following Jesus and working with him to create a world reflecting God's values.

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS

By grace we are God's
and with joy God forgives,
reaching out to us in Christ Jesus
and nourishing us
for life without limit.
Thanks be to God.

THE GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

The Lord be with you.
AND ALSO WITH YOU.
Lift up your hearts.
WE LIFT THEM TO THE LORD.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
IT IS RIGHT TO GIVE OUR THANKS AND PRAISE.

We do indeed give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are your ways and thoughts above ours.

You spread out creation like a rich banquet
and poured forth blessings like an ever-flowing stream.
In the days of Moses, you rescued your people from slavery,
and nourished them in the wilderness.

In your son, Jesus Christ,
you have met us in our suffering again,
and shown us the way through the deep waters of death
to the promised land of resurrection life.
Remembering this, we cling to you,
sheltered beneath your wings,
knowing that though disaster may beset us
and push us to the limits of our endurance,
you will replenish our strength from your overflowing table,
and so enable us to stand firm
and rest trustingly in your abundant mercy.

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1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

In this passage Paul tackles the issue of worshiping idols instead of worshiping God and warns about the damage this can bring. To the Corinthians God was an abstract divine principal – not a God capable of wrath. They had a domesticated God to fit in with their own precepts. The Corinthians Christian community is tempted by the cultural norms of their time of worshiping idols as well as God.

Paul turns this view on its head. God is the only God and his divinity cannot be shared with other forms of religion or worship. If however in every part of their lives the Corinthians are faithful and turn from idolatry, their faith will save them, nothing will be able to destroy them. They and we, however, should never be complacent. We should never take God for granted.

Luke 13: 1-9

This passage begins with two disasters neither of which can be historically verified. The Gospel writer is conveying to the reader that God will judge us. Even if the community which surrounds us does not affect us with judgment and danger, God's judgment still awaits us.

This passage also teaches of second chances. The parable of the fig tree illustrates that people will be given a second chance, but they are still required to look at their behaviour and motives. The fig tree gets another chance to bear fruit, but eventually if it is barren, it perishes. We will not always have time to turn over a new leaf, or change the way we live, so there is urgency here. There is also a challenge to realize that we need to recognize the challenge of Jesus is personal. It does not just apply to other people, but it also applies to each one of us.

Comment:

The themes are repentance and bearing fruit. One leads to the other. To repent is to do an about-face. To bear fruit is to use bestowed gifts for the well-being of others. Both repentance and bearing fruit imply that someone other than we ourselves will influence our behaviour. To repent is to obey God. To bear fruit is to serve our neighbour. Therein lies the great commandment. [James G. Kirk, "When We Gather", Year C, p 56]

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Similar assumptions were even more pervasive in Jesus' day, and in this week's gospel text, Jesus addresses a group of people who believe that God's judging hand could be seen in recent events: "Pilate killed some people just as they were making their sacrifice. Do you think that these who died were worse offenders than those who survived? I tell you, No!" Jesus debunks the notion that those who suffer tragedy are more deserving of this fate than anyone else. Through the parable of the farmer and the fig tree, he depicts God as one who loves all people equally.

Message:

Suffering and prosperity are not punishments or rewards, but God's grace may eventually be exhausted by those who squander it.