**20th March 2022**

**Luke 13.1-9**

Call to worship

Come, you who are weary with waiting.
Come, you who are hungry for change and fulfilment.
Come, you who are lost and seeking direction.
Come, to the one who will refresh, revive and redeem you.

A gathering prayer

Loving Lord, together we wait on you: embrace us.
Lifegiving Lord, we hunger for you: change us.
Lord of the Way, we often feel lost: direct us.
Lord of our time, forgive our misuse: redeem us.
Amen.

A prayer of approach

God of grace and growth,
in this season of Lent and with spring blossoming all around us,
we bring to you in word, music and prayer,
our desire to change for the better –
trusting in your patience,
rooting ourselves in your Scriptures,
believing in your love,
appreciating the limitations of time,
and celebrating the gift of life
and all that there is to look forward to.
In Jesus’ name.
Amen.

A prayer of adoration

God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
you nurture and nourish the soil of our lives,
you watch over us patiently and expectantly,
you fill us with the nutrients we need in order to grow,
and you rejoice when we too,
nurture, protect and watch over others – in your name.
Amen.

A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

A prayer of confession

Lord God,
forgive us when we are slow to change, but quick to judge;
when we take more from life than we give back;
when we give up on others too soon and offer support too late;
when we deny others the opportunity to grow, and uproot their dreams.
Forgive us and grant us your patience, perseverance and vision,
and inspire us to care for all you have made.
We ask this in Jesus’ name.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Loving God, in whom all things are possible,
for giving us time enough to change and grow:
we thank you with all our heart.
For giving us the desire to change and grow:
we thank you with all our mind.
For giving us the opportunity to change and grow:
we thank you with all our soul.
And for forgiving us when we rush, judge
and deny others those same opportunities:
we thank you with all our strength.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

We praise you, living God, that through the life, death and
resurrection of your Son, Jesus,
we have the chance to begin again, as we learn from his words;
we have the opportunity to flourish, as we follow in his footsteps;
we have the calling to serve, as we grow in his likeness;
we have the time to do what is ours to do, as we trust his promises –
slowly but surely, day by day.
Amen.

**Luke 13.1-9**

**Sermon**

My grandma was always anxious that we put on clean underwear every day just in case something bad happened to us and we needed medical attention which involved us being stripped down to our pants.

Bad stuff happens all around us, even if we have the inestimable privilege of living in a time and place that is not experiencing war or civil unrest, famine or flood, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, or indeed a pandemic. Every week some ten or eleven thousand people die in England and Wales from a wide variety of causes: many peacefully in old age, but many after long struggles with illness or injury, some still relatively young, and others through accidents or violence. Physical pain and sickness find their close counterparts in grief and mental illness. For others again, suffering arises as consequence of external circumstances: poverty, unemployment, homelessness, bullying, prejudice or – topically – unexpected increases in energy or food costs.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As the war in the Ukraine shockingly continues into another week, we may struggle to handle our sadness at the loss of life and homes. Watching scenes of devastation, young children and mothers making long treacherous journeys to escape the fighting, fathers separated, we long for their suffering to end.

Today’s Gospel reading is unclear on whether Jesus thought that Pilate’s cruelty, rather than the Galileans’ sins, was responsible for the latter’s suffering, or that, say, shoddy construction was the cause of the 18 deaths in the Tower of Siloam incident. What is clear is that he totally refuted his hearers’ belief that the suffering was either their own fault or any kind of divine punishment for their past behaviour. This is consistent with his teaching, ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged’ (Matthew 7.1; Luke 6.37). Judgement is God’s prerogative, and God’s alone.

Rather than entering into the ‘why’ of tragedies, Jesus’ concern is for us to respond to the fragility of life, by living out the Kingdom values of love, compassion, forgiveness and grace. Our day-to-day actions, attitudes and choices are opportunities to enable a more compassionate and loving society. It doesn’t matter who is suffering, or why we may think they’re suffering; our Christ-like vocation is always to relieve suffering.

Do you have an attitude that you wish to change? Pray for change each day this week, and that you may become more ‘fruitful’.

That said, Jesus does issue a warning ‘But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’

Jesus is not interested in the details of the stories. Nor is he keen on the debate that was clearly going on about the victims perhaps being punished for wrongdoing. He makes it quite clear that whether or not these victims were 'worse offenders' than anyone else would not be God's main concern. He seems to be saying that what matters is to be spiritually ready for death, should it arrive suddenly. The priority, as Jesus sees it, is the spiritual equivalent of having one's underwear clean and presentable should one meet an accident unexpectedly.

Perhaps this message makes us uncomfortable because our culture doesn't care for reminders about death – especially untimely death.

Johnny was going home one day past his grandfather's house with a couple of his chums.  As they passed the house they spied the old gentleman out on his porch in his rocking chair with a big black book (the bible) on his lap reading rather intently.

"What's your grandfather doing", asked one of Johnny's friends.

"Oh - grandpa - he's revising for his finals", Johnny replied.

None of us can put off the day when we are called home for the finals - home to account for what we have done and what we have not done.

The elephant in the room about any talk about faith in God is about fear and threat and punishment – what if you don’t accept the good news of Jesus Christ? What if you reject God?

Most of our society don’t do God. Yet when bad things happen they may get angry. They may ask ‘where is God?’ Those questions are always there when we feel life has been unfair and random.

As a minster I often do funerals of people who have had a raw deal out of life. I say ‘if there is no God, then all we are left with here is a sad day, marking a sad loss, and all we can say in a downcast type of way is ‘that’s life! But if there is God then there is the hope that this sad day will not be the last day, the end of the story. On the third day…..’

Fear is a fundamental feature of human existence and Jesus took this fear, which people felt, seriously. He does not try to gloss over it or pretend its not there. He simply asks, in effect, if we are fearful, what is it that we should truly fear. What is the most fearful thing that could happen? Jesus suggests that the most fearful thing that could happen is to be cut off forever from the living God. But if we turn our heart and mind to that living God, we find that we are of infinite value.

Just a chapter earlier Jesus comments (Luke 12. 4-7)

***4****“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.****5****But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.*

But then Jesus goes on and describes this awesome God into whose hands we will fall, full of fear and trembling:

***6****Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.****7****Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

When we turn to God we find we are of infinite value. We need have no fear*. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4.16-19)*

There are hard sayings in the Bible which it is dishonest to ignore. They bring home to us the crucial importance of the decisions we make in this life, through which we shape the souls of other people and ourselves. Through our decisions we make ourselves into people who one day will come to the searing gentleness of divine light when all will be seen for what it is.

We are left with a tension, a proper tension between the seriousness of the moral life and trust in an all-loving God. If we take seriously the moral claims which life makes upon us, then any trace of self satisfaction and self righteousness must be quickly eliminated. If we take seriously how much we mean to God then all self condemnation and fear will be dissolved.

St Augustine caught the tension when he wrote about the two people crucified either side of Christ

‘Do not despair (he wrote); one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.

I think St Augustine overstated his case. One thief asked for forgiveness and Jesus promised he would be with him in paradise. The other cursed and mocked Jesus. But crucially Jesus didn’t curse and mock him back. He didn’t say anything to him but did pray for all ‘*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

Who can be saved? With God all things are possible.

Having said all that perhaps Jesus is not talking about what happens when people die in this passage. He says in verse five *‘But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

The key words are ‘you too’. In line with the warnings Jesus has issued several times already and will continue to issue right up to his crucifixion, Jesus could be making clear that those who refuse his summons to change direction, to abandon the crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome, will suffer the consequences. Those who take up the sword will perish by the sword.

When Jerusalem fell in AD70. It was a bloody attempt at revolution and great loss of life occurred. One could say it was a direct result of refusing to follow the way of non-violent peaceful resistance which Jesus had urged throughout his ministry.

There's a second part to the message of Jesus in the passage from Luke. It ties in with our contemporary passion for gardens and all things horticultural. Very often on TV programmes you hear about what to do when a plant is not bearing the expected fruit. There's usually a description of how the plant has been cared for and advice on how to get it back to flowering or fruiting as it should. Sometimes the verdict is to scrap this plant and start again – or even that this is not the right place to try growing this species: don't even bother to get another.

*Soil was at a premium in Israel. It was not unusual for a vineyard owner to give a little bit of his soil up for a fruit tree but the tree took up the best soil, the deepest soil, and required the most water. A fig tree doesn't grow fruit until three years after planting. The owner in this story, had given the tree "due season" to bear fruit and yet the tree bore no fruit. It took up valuable space and resources. The owner questioned why the tree was
allowed to "even use up ground."

God had given the Israelites the choicest ground. Their land possessed everything necessary to make themselves a great nation, indeed, a light to all nations. They were strategically positioned to send the fruit of God north and south, east and west; but instead, in-fighting continued to make them a worthless fruit tree.*
Everyone one of us and all of our churches will have to answer (from God's perspective) this same question; "Why does it even use up the ground?" Are we bearing fruit?

We certainly live in neurotic times when there is great anxiety among people to achieve all they can. Parents are anxious that their children get to the right schools and do themselves justice. Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations and they can be crushing.

The point is that life does not ask us to become what we are not. The fig tree was only required to produce figs. No more. You and I are asked only to accomplish what our gifts and personalities allow. But we are asked to accomplish just that.

Another way to describe the Christian attitude toward bearing fruit in our lives and toward moral and spiritual effort, is to remember the words of Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me."

We would also do well to make a motto out of a line from Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. He expressed this same profound paradox when he wrote: "Work hard and struggle as if everything depended on you; yet pray and trust God as if everything depended on God."

These sayings of Jesus and this parable of the fig tree contain a tension at the heart of them. The need for responsibility and action: the dependence on God who brings all things to fruition.

May we be ready for whatever comes. May we bear the fruit of faith in God.

**Prayer**
God of justice and journeying,
you travel with us through Lent towards the city of Jerusalem
and the trials that face you there.

Be with us this week as events challenge our faith
and as we encounter people suffering, around us and at a distance.

Help us to see where the important questions lie in every situation and stop us from being distracted by things that need not concern us.

Strengthen our witness to the values of justice and freedom for all your children and renew our commitment to pray for the world as you see it can be.

In the name of your son, Jesus, our companion and friend.
**Amen.**

Prayers of intercession

God of all,
we weep for the pain of our broken world.
In a dry and weary land where there is no water,
and where our choices often lead to pain, not joy,
we cry to you for healing.
Hungry for hope, we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God.
Feed us and strengthen us.

God of all,
we mourn the senseless loss of life.
As a boat carrying refugees capsizes off the coast of Libya,
we long for governments to create a fair and humane settlement programme.
While we watch and pray, we remember the dead and seek justice
and we recommit to opening our hearts and homes –
saving who we can and when we can,
reaching out to others with the generosity we have received from you.
Hungry for hope, we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God.
Feed us and strengthen us.

God of all,
we lament the failure of peace-making and peacekeeping.
As war rages across Ukraine and fresh fighting breaks out in the Dafur region of Sudan,
and hunger spreads across the land and people starve in war zones,
as armed groups attack civilians in Ethiopia,
and acts of brutality are committed against the innocent – here and elsewhere,
we long for the protection of the vulnerable.
We pray for the safety of journalists telling the truth in war zones,
for the freedom of voices that challenge the status quo,
for the laying down of arms and for the end of armed conflict.
Hungry for hope, we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God.
Feed us and strengthen us.

God of all,
we despair at our disregard for the welfare of our precious planet.
As demonstrators gather in Brazil
to stand for the earth against destructive environmental bills,
we pray for wisdom and longsightedness to prevail.
As our world struggles with the challenges of conflict, war and climate change,
we know the darkness of the human heart and our desire for self-aggrandisement.
Fill us with your love.
Send out roots down deep into your word,
and when the moment comes for us to use our influence for good,
may we be ready to answer your call.
Hungry for hope, we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God.
Feed us and strengthen us.

God of all,
we long for peace of mind and heart.
as children of war struggle with trauma.
We know too that many are struggling in our neighbourhoods and families:
people who are fearful for the future
lonely, bereaved or ill in mind or body.
In silence we name before you the people we know who need your healing.
(Silence)
May the needs of each person be fed with kindness and love.
Hungry for hope
we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God:
All: Feed us and strengthen us.

God of all,
we hold on to your promise that you will come close to us when we call on you.
So, we lift up our hands and speak your name in all the troubles of this world
and in the waywardness of our own hearts.
In the shadow of your wings may we find rest,
fresh vision for the future and strength to travel on.
Hungry for hope, we look to you
for the bread of heaven and the water of life.
We call on you our God.
Feed us and strengthen us. Amen

A prayer for all ages together

*Practise saying ‘tick tock’ to sound like a big clock, accompanied by a swinging arm pendulum motion. Repeat this after every line except the last.*

Lord of time,
you are patient with us.
You give us time to change.
You allow time to grow.
Help us grow this week.
Amen.

A sending out prayer

Lord God, you look for growth and fruit;
help us this week to grow closer to you,
and to be patient when we have to wait –
as you are patient with us.
Amen.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/118-march-april-2022-c/lent-3/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)