

Luke 13:1-9: *Jesus confronts the idea that natural or human-initiated disasters only befall the sinful or the evil, and challenges the self-righteousness of his hearers, calling them to repentance, even as he reflects, in parable, on God's mercy that gently waits for us to wake up and start bearing fruit (parable of the barren fig tree).*

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The parable of the fig tree represented those within and beyond the synagogue in Antioch who were rejecting the radical inclusive social and religious message of Jesus. In the story, such people stood condemned by the man [*a metaphor for Yahweh God, the Judge of all*], but it was the gardener [*a metaphor for Jesus*] who was pleading for a little more time so that the tree could be nurtured and fruit would grow. This was Luke's literary counter-balance between judgement and compassion: there is a profound warning to repent or else, followed by the comfort of Yahweh God's compassion towards all. Many will know the weight of one's personal transgressions and feelings of guilt being suddenly lifted by the experience that Jesus is all compassion! However, there was a further warning in Luke's message to the Jewish Jesus sect: an awareness of such love was no excuse to continue wilfully abusing such compassion and mercy.
(Matthew Fox)

Readings COCU21C Lent 3C

Last week, we were challenged to recognise that faith, on one level, is not a protection from the world's woes, but rather, it is a call to take up the cross, and embrace God's life even when we have to suffer to do so. On another level, though, we were invited to celebrate that faith does lead us into a life that is deeper, richer and more meaningful than one of faithlessness. This week, we are taken one step further - we are to reject the idea that suffering is God's punishment for sin, and blessing (or the avoidance of suffering) God's reward. Rather, we are called to recognise our own need of God's mercy and grace, and to respond by "bearing fruit" - manifesting the life of God's reign, and bringing grace and mercy into the world. The Lectionary leaves us no option to answer Jesus' call to compassion and justice. This week we are shocked out of our complacency, and challenged to be more determined in our commitment to follow Christ, even as we are assured of the gifts of God's presence and God's provision to fulfil our calling.

But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. - C.S. Lewis

"Jesus does not call us to a new religion, but to life" - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The significance of this week's Gospel reading, in the light of the many natural disasters, acts of violence, and financial struggles in our world over the last few years, is nothing less than obvious. While much can be said - and has been said - about whether these things are God's punishment or not, Jesus closes the book on that discussion very firmly. But, he doesn't close the book on the significance of such tragic events for every person - it reminds us that we all need God's grace and mercy, and that we cannot stand off and debate the pain of others academically while ignoring the part our self-righteousness plays in their pain. There is a sense in the suffering of the poor and marginalised is not a judgement on the them - it is a judgment on those who have allowed the inequalities that made them vulnerable to such suffering. We cannot help but be challenged by the statistics that reveal that those who are the worst hit by climate change, war, and economic crises are the poorest and most vulnerable in our world. Nor can we be anything but challenged by Jesus call to bear fruit by serving and protecting these "least" ones. Who needs you to release your self-righteousness and complacency and offer them compassion and help right now in your community?

(John van de Laar, Sacredise)

Psalm 63:1-8: *A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah, longing for God's nourishing presence, offering thanksgiving for God's satisfying care and life.*
O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;

**my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.

**Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.**

So I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

**for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.**

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Isaiah 55:1-9

An invitation from God for those who are hungry and thirsty to receive food and drink free of charge, to seek God while God may be found, and to recognise that God's ways are much higher than the ways of human beings.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a commander and leader for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13: *The disobedience and rebelliousness of the Israelites in the wilderness is a warning to us to resist the temptations we face. But, God provides, and strengthens us, if we will allow it.*

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.