

SERMON: Sunday – 20 March 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Seeing Potential

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Jesus hears the shocking news of tragedy in Siloam when a tower collapses and kills 18 people. And to emphasis how bad things are, there is an accompanying report that Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea has mingled the blood of some Galilean Jews with the sacrifices.

Apparently those making the report were looking for Jesus to offer some explanation of why bad things happen to normal people—in this case even while they were worshiping.

It was commonplace to assume that a victim must have done something terrible for God to allow something so tragic to happen to them. In other words, bad things happen to bad people; accidents happen for a reason.

The Jews saw the Galileans as less, uncultured. Rather than focus on these others, Jesus wants the Jews to look at their own erring hearts, their misconduct, misbehaviour, their need to turn to God.

It's typical of a finger pointing, blaming culture to ask the question, who's fault was it and look for someone to blame, when in fact sometimes no one is at fault.

Jesus suggests that the tragedy suffered by the victims of the falling of the tower of Siloam were not related to their sinfulness. And he turned the attention onto the interrogators, wanting them to focus on their own souls rather than look for someone to blame.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." [Lk 13:2–5]

Jesus' mention of the fall of the Tower of Siloam suggests that sometimes accidents happen. Even in the absence of persecution, death can come unexpectedly to anyone, irrespective of how righteous or how sinful they are.

And according to one commentator, Jesus may have been emphasising that

the time granted by God for repentance is limited.

And I suppose the answer to that is that the time to repent is always now. You can't have a fruitful relationship with God without repenting, without a change of mind. Everyone needs to turn back to God sometime. It's so important Jesus mentions it twice in this parable in the first 5 verses of Luke 13.

So much for repentance.

I don't really think this parable of Jesus is designed to explain human suffering?

However, it touches on that and so does the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. So, I want to make brief mention of that.

Often when we're faced with the question of human suffering we hear these sort of answers:

It's all Gods plan?

This test will strengthen your faith?

God is growing your character.

Chin up. It's not as bad as some people have to go through.

Think of those poor Ukrainians, for example.

And for those near breaking point in their suffering, there is the declaration that "God ... will not let you be tested beyond your strength" (10:13).

(SLIDE)

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it - 1 Corinthians 10:13.

That verse has always sat a little uneasily with me. Though it has helped me often in the past, particularly the bit about God 'will also provide a way out (of the testing) so that you can endure it', I'm not sure it's a helpful thing to say to someone who's suffering.

Sometimes all we can do is to sit with the suffering. As Jesus suffered so do we. And God in Christ is with all who suffers, and goes through it with them. It's part of what it means for Love to never give up.

And not giving up is what I want to focus on now because I believe that is a big part of what this parable teaches, particularly the second half of the parable where Jesus uses the fig tree as a visual aid.

I came across this reflection this week based on our reading from Luke 13:

On my kitchen window
sits an orchid plant.
Its flowers have long dropped.
It is not the prettiest of things
without its magnificent yet delicate flowers.
What do I do with it now?
It looks like a twig in a pot
with a few leaves hinting at life.
Ach, it really is an ugly thing.
Who wants to look at that?
And yet with so little effort on my part, a little water now and again,
(and I mean now and again)
I start to see some buds appear.
A bit more time then.
And my is it worth the wait!
Those flowerheads are triumphant!
What if I had just given up?
What if that twig had landed in the compost bin?
What if, at my lowest moment, people gave up on me?

Reading that made me reflect on that shrivelled old fig tree in a new way,
shifting the focus less on our need for repentance in order to bear fruit onto
the patience of the one in charge of the tree.

The fig tree may have been old but it still had potential.
The Gardener sees the potential in the tree.
The Gardener doesn't give up.
God, endows Adam and Eve, the first Gardeners, male and female, side by
side, with the ability to see potential in all things; and with the conviction not to
give up on what is there before them.

God is the God who doesn't give up on creation.
God is the God who doesn't give up on us.
God is the God who gives second chances, again and again.

The one who looks after the vineyard says, "leave it alone for one more year,
and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut
it down."

Did God send Jesus into the vineyard to tend it, dig round it, fertilise it and
create the conditions possible for the tree to bear fruit?

Is this why Jesus is telling this parable?

Yes it's to expose the hypocrisy of those who pointed the finger at sinners yet at the same time refused to address their own need to repent, to change their thinking.

But Jesus was the friend of sinners not their judge, so this parable also speaks of the patience of the Creator and the relationship with humanity which Jesus embodied and revealed what it means for humanity to be 'in Christ'.

(SLIDE)

God never gives up on his beloved. God never gave up on the beloved people of Israel, wearied and scarred by desert wanderings, (for) "they drank from the spiritual rock ... and that rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Christ then existed long before Jesus became the Christ in first century Palestine.

Christ is the potential and the foresight and the conviction to marry creature and creation in perfect harmony.

Christ is the love force fusing Spirit and matter in frail flesh.

The potential within people is Christ within, and God cannot give up on God within.

God went before, goes before, has gone ahead. Does not give up.

Love never gives up. Love never fails.

But even if love appears to fail, as in Jesus, crucified, dead and buried, there is a Greater Force, who sees the potential in lost causes, who nurtures, tends, cares, and waits for new life to appear.

(SLIDE)

"Sing we the song of the Lamb who was slain.
Dying in weakness but rising to reign."

There are no lost causes in God's kingdom, only the potential for love to grow.

So God says this, I think:

Go, and cultivate something beautiful in the world.

Nourish it, fertilise it.

Cut out the dead bits.

Make room for the light to do its work.

And with patience and hope, watch it grow and be a blessing.