

SERMON – 23/3/25
'The Parable of the Fig Tree'

Luke 13:1-9

"Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?'" (Luke 13:2)

As we pause this morning on our Lenten journey with Jesus towards the Cross I want to look with you today at the vexed question of why there is such a thing as suffering and why suffering often seems to be marked by unfairness.

Why? It is one of the most often-uttered questions in human experience generally and probably the question that gives people of faith most cause to doubt the goodness of God. Why? Why did that have to happen? Why did it happen to me (or to my loved-one)? In the face of accident or tragedy... Why? When a child suffers or a person is struck down in their prime... Why? When physical or mental illness takes away the enjoyment of life... Why are some smitten and others spared? Why? Why? Why?

Even in this past week, as 59 were killed and 170 injured, most of them young people, in a fire at a night club in North Macedonia, or as more than 400 (many of them children) were killed in Gaza in violation of the ceasefire, a groaning 'Why' erupts from our deepest being. It was question that was on the lips of those who came to Jesus in this morning's reading. Why were some Galileans who had come to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem murdered by Pontius Pilate and their blood grotesquely mixed with that of the sacrifices they were offering? Why did 18 innocent people die when the tower in Siloam collapsed? The same atrocities and tragedies took place in Jesus' day as happen in our time – there is nothing new under the sun.

It would be a whole lot easier if we could say that the wicked are struck down and the righteous are raised up, but we *know* that it's never as straightforward as that. Why? Why do some of this world's greatest rogues seem to sail through life untouched by suffering while there are saints who are never free from pain or who lurch from one crisis to another?

Sometimes, it's true, a link can be made between a person's actions and the suffering that befalls them – we know that those who play with fire are likely to get burnt; those who abuse their bodies in some way are likely to reap the consequences and those who act recklessly are more likely to have an accident but innocent bystanders also get hurt. There is no easy equation to be made between wrongdoing and suffering, and there is no simple 'Because...' in response to our 'Why?'

But that is not to say that we cannot or should not wrestle with the question. Many, many people have faced illness, depression, disability, tragedy and the prospect of an untimely death themselves or amongst their family and friends and have found a way through. They may have discovered that there is no simple answer to the question Why but they have persevered and have found deeper understanding or a way to move forward that brings peace and even joy in the midst of suffering and I could introduce you to many people who have been nothing less than inspirational as they have faced sometimes unbearable struggles and have exchanged the entirely natural question 'Why me?' for a genuine 'Why should it *not* be me?'

This is the kind of territory that Jesus takes us to in our Gospel reading this morning, by encouraging us to take a side-step away from the yearning question 'Why?' and to explore different questions and a different perspective.

Some in the crowd that day came to Jesus with their anguish over a group of Galileans who had come to worship in Jerusalem and had been grotesquely murdered on the orders of the Roman Governor and their blood offered on the altar. Now we don't know precisely what had gone on in that particular situation but we do know that similar atrocities happen in places of worship whether at the hands of lone shooters or suicide bombers or under the orders of authorities cracking down on particular expressions of faith. Why did these Galileans suffer so terribly even though they were in the very act of honouring the Lord in worship? Why? Where was God when they really needed Him?

Jesus replies in the words with which I began: 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?' And He quickly answers His own

questions with an emphatic 'No indeed!' He also reminds His audience of another episode that must have been well known at the time. The tower at Siloam had collapsed, killing 18 people and Jesus says, 'Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!' (v.4,5a) Jesus is emphatically denying that people who suffer are somehow receiving some kind of divine retribution, and He is laying the blame fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the Roman governor and those who carried out his orders in the case of the Galilean worshippers, and on those who built and maintained the tower that collapsed. Those who suffered did not suffer because they were somehow worse sinners or more guilty than those who in the vicinity of both these tragedies but who walked away unharmed. The same could be said of the victims of this week's suffering in North Macedonia and in Palestine.

If you are wrestling with the question Why me? in the midst of your suffering, hear this: whatever is going on, this is not some sort of punishment from God.

But here is where Jesus springs a surprise in asking us to consider a fresh perspective on suffering, because after His words of comfort in both of the examples He gives He immediately offers this challenge: 'But unless you repent, you too will all perish.' (v.3b, 5b) On the face of it, He seems to be saying the exact opposite of the assurance He has just given them – in the one breath He says that those who suffered are no more guilty than anyone else and that they are not suffering as a punishment for their wickedness; and then in the next breath He is calling us to repentance that we might be saved from death. Well, either He is spectacularly contradicting Himself or He is trying to lead us into a different dimension of understanding. That's where the parable of the fig tree comes into play, showing us that we are dealing with the kind of God who in the words of the prophet Ezekiel 'takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather than they turn from their ways and live.' (Ezekiel 33:11)

"A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it

down! Why should it use up the soil?' "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (vv.6-9)

In the parable, the fig tree is each one of us (for we are often fruitless) and the caretaker of the vineyard is the Lord. The call goes out to uproot the fruitless fig tree but the gracious and merciful word comes from the Lord: Give it another chance – I'm still working on this one.

And that, I think, takes us to the heart of the matter this morning. Though we live in a world where suffering and tragedy are part of everyday life, we worship a God who is full of grace, abounding in mercy and who longs for each one of us not to perish in our sins but to enter into fulness of life in Christ yielding the fruit of His Spirit

Jesus is seeking to turn us from asking that ultimately fruitless and unanswerable question 'Why?' and is prompting us to ask questions that will lead us in an entirely new direction. How fruitlessly we get caught up in questions of why those young folk died so tragically in the night club fire in North Macedonia last weekend or why the authorities in Israel or Palestine or Russia or Ukraine should have unleashed deadly weapons on innocent citizens when we should be asking God 'What must *I* do now?' Or when we are struggling with our own personal or family circumstances how pointlessly we get caught up wondering 'Why me?' when we should be asking 'What can I learn in the midst of this?' And 'Where do I need to go next?'

We need to be asking those questions of God Himself, realising that the answers we are looking for will be found (as Job found) in humbling ourselves before the Lord. People are not smitten because they are more guilty than others. As the apostle Paul writes, 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' (Rom.3:23) All of us have sinned and all of us are called to repentance and to seek forgiveness and fullness of life from God in Christ. And what we need to take to ourselves today is that God is not some tyrant, meting out disasters on those who incur His displeasure but God is merciful and patient and kind, desiring that we live life to the full not only here and now but throughout

eternity. The question 'Why?' will always be with us in the face of suffering and disaster and tragedy but without wishing to diminish our need to wrestle with that question, let me invite you to wonder what God is doing in your life at the moment, digging round my roots and working in the fertiliser of the good teaching of His Word. And as the 'Why?' fades a little bit into the background, take time to consider other questions like 'What is God saying to me in the midst of all this?' or 'What changes might God be trying to prompt in my life?' or 'How could I be more fruitful than I have been?'