

## ANOTHER CHANCE

Isaiah 55. 1-9

1 Corinthians 10. 1-13

Luke 13. 1-9

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

We live, do we not, in an age where catastrophes and tragedies figure in the news headlines with alarming regularity. Terrorist bombings; mass shootings; kidnappings; earthquakes; hurricanes. In our Lord's time, things were no different; the catastrophes and tragedies simply occurred in different places. In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of St Luke's gospel, some people report a very dramatic incident to Jesus. Apparently Pilate had slaughtered a group of Galileans in Jerusalem, with the result that their blood had been mixed with that of pagan sacrifices. We find no other mention of this particular event in other ancient sources; but the historian Josephus' accounts of Pilate's confrontations with the Jews confirm that such bloodshed was not uncommon.<sup>1</sup>

When Christ heard this report, he knew that his hearers adhered to the popular notion that sin was the cause of calamity.<sup>2</sup> According to this common pious belief, if God is responsible for everything that happens, and if God is a just God, then calamities must be the result of human sinfulness. The fallacy in such logic, of course, is the notion that God is the immediate cause of all events. This leaves no room for human freedom, or for freedom in the created order; and therefore for events that God does not directly control.

---

<sup>1</sup> We know, for example, that Pilate's troops killed a group of Samaritans climbing Mount Gerizim; that Pilate introduced Roman effigies into Jerusalem, causing a riot and a march on Caesarea; and that Pilate even seized the Jewish Temple treasury funds in order to build an aqueduct.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Job 4. 17; Ezek 18. 26; Deut 28-30; Jn 9. 2.

But our Lord seizes this teachable moment and chooses to ignore the immediate causes of the Galilean catastrophe and the particulars of the situation. He says, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?’ And he then refers to another recent event that had recently occurred in Jerusalem, at the southern approach to the Temple mount: a tower in the city wall near the Pool of Siloam<sup>3</sup> had collapsed, killing eighteen people. Jesus asks, do you think that those eighteen who were killed ‘were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?’

Christ’s answers both of his questions with a resounding ‘No’. It is not because the Galileans were worse sinners that they were killed; and it is not because the people at Siloam were worse sinners that they died.<sup>4</sup> But all the while exposing the fallacious reasoning of his hearers, our Lord chooses to drive home some key points: life is uncertain; death is capricious; and judgement is inevitable. Just as the Galileans and Jerusalemites had perished suddenly, so all of those who heard Jesus would also perish if they did not repent. Christ is not warning of physical death, of course. Instead, he uses death as a metaphor for the coming judgement. The image is shocking. The need for repentance is urgent.

Our Lord then goes on to tell a parable, using the image of a fig tree. In order to understand this parable, we need to remember two things. Firstly, we need to remember that all of Jesus’ parables are about us and the way we live. Secondly, we need to remember the importance of the fig tree in the Promised Land.

In many ways, the fig tree was the most popular of trees. The picture of the Promised Land was ‘a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey’.<sup>5</sup> When the spies looked over the

---

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to archaeological discoveries, it is now known that the Pools of Siloam and Bethesda were two separate pools separated by a colonnade.

<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, Jesus himself will suffer a death that seems a personal punishment for sin.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Deut 8. 8.

land to see how fertile it was, they brought back grapes, figs and pomegranates as proof.<sup>6</sup> When peaceful times and prosperity are described in the Old Testament, the image used is that of someone sitting under his own vine and fig tree.<sup>7</sup> The fig tree was used as a symbol of the covenant between Israel and God.<sup>8</sup> The lack of fruit in a fig tree was a symbol of a lapse in faithfulness.<sup>9</sup>

The fig tree is a lovely tree, even though it does not grow to be terribly tall, about 15 to 20 feet high. The spread of its branches can be up to 30 feet; and thus it provides good shelter and shade. But more than shade, the fig tree was valued for its fruit, and it cropped twice a year. The first crop comes off the old wood in June, and the second crop comes off the new wood in September. A fig tree takes about three years to reach maturity; if it has not produced fruit by then, it is not likely to do so. Owners of fig trees expect them to produce fruit. A fig tree that does not produce fruit simply takes up room, feeds off the land and gives nothing in return.

The fig tree in Christ's parable was all 'promise' and no 'performance'. It had its leaves; perhaps it even had flowers; but it did not produce fruit, and that was its main purpose. To give shelter from the heat was not enough; the tree was there to produce figs, and since it did not, it was useless.

In the normal scheme of things, the fig tree in our Lord's parable should have been cut down. But thanks to the intervention of the gardener, another year of life is granted to the tree. It will be given one more year to produce fruit. Although there is mercy in Jesus' parable, the time until judgement is extended for just a short time.

In this parable, Christ is asking his hearers to identify with the fig tree that has been given one last chance. The point is the same: the time is short; and we have one

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Num 13. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 4. 25; Mic 4. 4; Zech 3. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 4. 25; Is 36. 16; Jer 24. 4-7; Joel 2. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jer 5. 17, 8. 13, 24. 8-10; Joel 2. 12.

last chance to put things right. If we do not use the time that remains, we will perish (in spiritual terms at least) like the Galileans and the Jerusalemites; and we will be cut down like the fig tree. No more forceful series of warnings could be given.

In our gospel text, St Luke has balanced the warnings of God's judgement with the promises of God's mercy. Luke also dismisses the popular, but incorrect theology of divine punishment without offering any simplistic answers to atrocities and calamities. If human beings die by the sword, or by accident, or by natural disaster, it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins, while sparing others. God will give even an unfruitful fig tree another chance.

On the other hand, the sudden calamity that claims human lives can serve as a warning of sudden judgement. Is life more precarious in modern societies, or does it just seem that way? Our Lord's warning strikes at our most vulnerable point. Try as we might, none of us can protect ourselves or those whom we love from every danger: disease, traffic accidents, crime, or random violence. Jesus affirms that these calamities are not God's doing. They do, however, stand as graphic reminders that life is fragile; and that any of us may find ourselves before our Maker without a moment's notice.

The parable of the fig tree invites us to consider the gift of another year of life as an act of God's mercy. Earlier in St Luke's gospel, John the Baptist had declared that the axe lay at the root, poised to strike (3. 9). Any tree that did not bear fruit would be cut down. In Christ's parable, however, the gardener pleads for (and is granted) one more year. Indeed, at the beginning of St Luke's gospel, our Lord proclaimed the arrival of 'the year of the Lord's favour' (4. 19), a year of forgiveness, restoration and second chances.

I wonder, what would we do if we only had only one year left to live, or only a short time in which to make up for wrongs done and opportunities missed? How important that year might be! The lesson of the fig tree is that you and I are challenged to live each day as if it were a gift from God. We are to live each day in such a way that we will have no fear of giving an account of how we have *produced fruit*; and how we have used the gifts that God has given us.

Amen.