

“Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

The idea that those who suffer misfortune are being punished by God for their sins is hard to shake off. It was the view held by the Jews of old; it is the idea lying behind the arguments of Job’s comforters; and it is the thought which lies behind the two short stories which opened today’s gospel. And one can still hear people today expressing the same thought. Just as Job rejected the arguments of his friends, so did Jesus.

It’s human nature on hearing of the misfortunes and mistakes of others, to wonder what they are being punished for. Jesus answered that question and issued a challenge to his questioners: “No, they haven’t been punished for their sins, but unless you repent, you will perish as they did.”

God through Christ gives us an invitation to accept his mercy and to follow his way whilst we are able to do so. As the OT reading for today says: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” (Isa 55: 6). The implication being that there may, will, come a time when it is too late, as Paul reminds his readers happened to many during the Exodus: “Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.” (1 Cor 10: 5). As the poet J.G. Whittier wrote:

Of all the sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’

The way to God is through repentance. This is much more than being sorry for our sins, important as that is. It goes to the heart of healing the alienation between God and man. As Abp Donald Coggan said: “Repentance is a positive thing, a life-attitude of turning one’s back on what is sinful and worthless, and turning one’s face towards the living God.”

As one looks at society, I don’t think that anyone can say we’ve made a success of things. The rampant secularism inevitably means that people inevitably worship false gods of money, possessions, power, fame. Individuality has been over-emphasised and all too often responsibilities laid at someone else’s door. So many, on being asked what their goal is, will say pleasure or happiness, and this can mean that relationships are, all too often shallow, shallow.

In 1996, John McGuinness won £10m in the National Lottery. He did the usual things with the money – new, larger house, car, holidays, jewellery for his girlfriend and some to the family. Yet he admits that it hasn’t made him any happier, in fact, it’s caused arguments and rifts in the family.

We’ve become so fixated on false gods, that true values have gone. Everything seems to be valued in money terms; we forget that though it can buy a house, it can’t buy a home. It can buy entertainment but it can’t buy happiness. It can buy medicine but not health, a bed but not sleep, and sex, but not love.

So much pleasure is self indulgence, and it can so easily begin to affect us. The results can be like the rot which begins at the heart of a pear, yet which looks wholesome on the outside. Or like a beautiful flower growing in the West Indies, yet when it is picked emits a most unpleasant odour.

What Jesus is warning us is that it isn’t just feeling sorry for our sins, it’s the whole direction our lives are taking which matters. If you seek your own salvation, as the Jews did whom Jesus mentioned in the first of the two stories he told this morning, trying to free themselves from Roman rule, then they shouldn’t be surprised if Rome turns round and crushes them.

Jesus didn’t come to save the Jews from Rome, but to bring them back to God; to re-direct their lives away from earth-bound longings, such as freedom from Rome, to the freedom which

comes from fellowship with God. At the end of chapter 13 Jesus says these deeply tragic words: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that murders the prophets and stones the messengers sent to her. How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not let me." (Lk 13: 34)

Remember three things come not back
The arrow sent upon its track,
It will not swerve, it will not stay_
Its speed; it flies to wound or slay.

The spoken word, so soon forgot_
By thee; but it has perished not;
In other hearts 'tis living still
And doing work for good or ill.

And the lost opportunity
That cometh back no more to thee.
In vain thou weep'st, in vain dost yearn;
These three shall never more return.

It isn't enough to go through the motions of Baptism, and marriage in church. And attendance at the Eucharist won't guarantee salvation. As Micah says: "This is what the Lord asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic 6: 8) It is lives which reflect a daily walk with God which find salvation. As Tom Wight has written: "Gospel symbols invite God's presence, but doing that whilst misbehaving is thumbing one's nose at divine mercy." Regular attendance in Church doesn't exempt us from our moral obligations during the week either in our public or private lives.

The warning in the first part of today's gospel seems pretty final, but the second part offers a ray of hope, as Jesus tells the story of the fig tree. It has grown for three years and borne no fruit. The owner tells the gardener to cut it down. "Leave it another year," said the gardener, "and if it is still barren, I'll cut it down." God's patience is long but not infinite. There comes a time of reckoning, but not yet, so seize the moment whilst there is still time.

The tenor of life today seems to act against the call of God. All of us who try to lead a Christian life find this difficult in the face of the prevailing climate of secularism, so we do well to heed the warning to repent. As John Crossan, a New Testament scholar, has said: "(Today) there is no lighthouse keeper. There is no lighthouse. There is no dry land. There are only people living on rafts made from their own imaginations. And there is the sea."

All this is not surprising now that the Bible, which fashioned European civilisation, is now only 35th in the list of books which have had the most significance in people's lives. Top came the phantasy "Lord of the Rings". As Don Beeby said: "Ironically rejected by many as myth and legend, the Bible lost out to fable, fantasy and fiction."

So repentance isn't simply saying sorry for our sins, though this is part of it. It also involves a turning away from the standards which fall short of God's way, and a turning towards God day by day. It isn't the people who protest their faith, but those who live it who fulfill God's will

. We can either view life through Christ or through the world. There's still time to decide, but it isn't endless, and time will catch up with us as it caught up with the Israelites, and the Galileans.

M.S. Nicholson wrote:

Let me hold lightly the things of the earth;
Transient treasures, what are they worth?
Moths can corrupt them, rust can decay;
All that bright beauty fades in a day.

Let me hold lightly temporal things –
I who am deathless, I who wear wings.

Let me hold fast, Lord, things of the skies;
Quicken my vision, open my eyes!
Show me thy riches, glory and grace,
Boundless as time is, endless as space.
Let me hold lightly things that are mine –
Lord, thou didst give me all that is thine.

There's a story which tells of old Hans, a woodsman, who was sitting eating his simple lunch of home-made bread and cheese. He became aware of his master approaching on his horse. The latter was an arrogant man, and his lip curled as he saw what Hans was eating.

"How can you eat such food?" he asked Hans. "It's more than adequate for my needs," replied the old man. He went on: "I had a dream last night that today the richest man in the wood will die and go to heaven." "What nonsense," replied his master, and spurred his horse away.

Nevertheless the old man's words left a niggling of doubt in the master's mind, so to be sure he called the doctor who examined him and found him to be in rude good health. "Nothing wrong with you," said the doctor. "You're good for many more years yet."

It was at this moment that there was an urgent knocking at the door, and a breathless messenger told the doctor he was needed. "Old Hans has died."