

Sunday 20th March

Isaiah 55:1-9

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Respond to God and Live life to the full

I wonder how you react when you hear about tragedies?

Be it the suffering at the hand of an invading army in Ukraine, or the suffering that comes through a pandemic., or an accident, or natural disaster or whatever.

I wonder if you ask the question - How can we square the pain that's all around us with a loving God?

Innocent people caught in crossfire or mortar bombing; victims of car accidents or house fires; injuries or worse while just going about everyday life.

Tragedies. They make us ask that most natural of questions. Why?

Why do people with so much love and potential die young?

Why does the cyclone hit; the flood come; the earthquake happen? Why does this family sail through life, while the one next door have to face up to unimaginable things?

What do people do to deserve such suffering?

It seems that in the gospel reading today people are asking Jesus that very question.

Look, we have heard about these pilgrims from Galilee who went up to Jerusalem to worship God, and they were massacred in the temple courtyards. Why?

and interestingly we recall that Jesus and his followers – remember they were also from Galilee – were themselves heading towards Jerusalem.

So perhaps the question being asked of Jesus was two edged ..

Are we going to carry on and possibly face the same fate as those pilgrims?
And why did this happen? What had these people done to deserve this?

Well, Jesus doesn't answer the first of these questions. That is left hanging. The answer to that question comes out as the story develops. It becomes apparent that

Jesus knows what will happen, he is aware of the inevitability that he will be killed in Jerusalem – we just need to look at vs 34 and 35 towards the end of the chapter...

I must be on my way because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.

But he does address the second question, - the why does this happen question - even if he does not quite give the answer the people were looking for. And perhaps that's because the Why Question is actually the wrong question for us to ask.

We don't get an explanation for suffering here. Instead we get a way of approaching it; a way of changing our behaviour to take account of this seemingly random world.

No, Jesus says, these Galileans who were killed were not worse sinners than others. They hadn't done anything that deserved this. There is no direct correlation, if you like, between the way we live and suffering. We aren't paid back in a direct way for the way we live. And that shouldn't really come as a surprise. For we know that often it seems the good that suffer and the bad that get away with it.

And in his answering (or not answering) the question Jesus himself talks about another tragedy that has happened to emphasise this. A somewhat different type of tragedy. One not attributable to a violent ruler, but one that we might call an accident. Those 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell. They were no worse people than others either

And he leaves the thoughts on the meaning of suffering there. Life is random. There is uncertainty. We cannot tell what will happen.

Sometimes our behaviour might make things more likely to happen. (and I suppose you could say Jesus' behaviour in continuing with his pilgrimage to Jerusalem was making the events of holy week more likely to happen.

And we see that today – people who drive fast, people who eat unhealthily, people who smoke, etc etc. There is some link between lifestyle and its consequences. But far more of life's sufferings and pains seem completely random. I am sure we can all think of such things. Seemingly chance events. In the wrong place at the wrong time we might say.

But mostly things appear to be random

And then Jesus then turns his mind to how we should live.

Repent – he says - Unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Repent; turn around; reset your priorities.

That seems a bit harsh. But I think what he is saying is that this could happen at any time. You are not immune to this kind of tragedy. You don't know when your time will come. And you have to live with that in mind.

Indeed, he tells the parable of the fig tree as an illustration. The number of chances you have will be limited – but you won't always (or even ever?) know what that limit is or when your last chance will be. And this has to affect the way you do live

The sad truth is that we will all die sometime. And perhaps the even sadder truth is that we don't know and won't know when that will be. But Jesus's concern is that far too many of us forget that truth, and just live for the future, or at least live assuming that there will be a future where we can do things differently and be different.

Perhaps we think I will do that ...,
When the children leave home ..
When I have some more money
When I retire
When I have a bit more time

But maybe the moment is now. Perhaps what he is saying is that we should Seize the moment; take the opportunities; respond to God and live life to the full now.

If we knew we had a year to live, or even a week to live, how would that change things?

We just need to think of any tragedy - If the people caught up in it knew that it was going to happen, how would they have changed the way they lived in those last few weeks?

If we knew, would we do change the way we lived?

And I'm not referring to things doing things like travelling and enjoyment and having a good time.

I am thinking about the important things of faith and life. On one level this could be responding to the call of God on our lives, and I would guess we have all done that

at some stage already. So perhaps for us a better way of understanding what Jesus is talking about is to think about putting our faith into practice; helping others, making the world a better place. Doing those things we might have dreamt of and hoped to do at some stage.

As someone said, you don't often get people saying on their deathbed "I wish I spent more time at the office".

The difficult, hard, but unquestioned truth in this passage is that life does not last forever, that for most of us much more than half of our life is gone and perhaps we have only a small amount of it left to respond enthusiastically to the news that Jesus has preached, to live out the gospel message. To respond to God in the way that we perhaps have wanted to for many years, but just haven't found the time or inclination.

Maybe Jesus is saying - now is the time.

He is not threatening us in here. He is pleading with us - the way God does in every moment. He is simply and realistically telling us that our lives are shorter than we might think or hope and that we would be foolish not to seize the opportunities to enjoy one another, to love one another, to do what we can to make sure there is a little less suffering in the world by the way we live our lives - while we have the time. To live lives to the full – as was always intended

The prophet Isaiah is talking about this as well in our OT reading

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

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.

Come and taste the good things I have on offer for you says God

So, don't waste your time on good intentions. Don't postpone what you need to do to live more kindly, more humbly, more justly today. Time is slipping away. Don't waste any more of it! Seize that opportunity now. And respond today to the call of God on your lives. You won't regret it