

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Third Sunday of Lent**

**20<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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'What have I done to deserve this?' It's a question we sometimes ask aloud ironically when something happens that we don't like. In asking the question, we are referring to the notion that suffering comes as a result of something we have done wrong. It's a notion that is still quite widely held, and it's a notion that was evidently current in Jesus's time, for in our Gospel reading today he refers to two recent events that have resulted in innocent deaths, asking his hearers whether they think that's why those people died.

The first event is about human violence. Herod had recently murdered a group of pilgrims from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices in the temple. The second event is about human misfortune. A tower had collapsed onto a group of people standing underneath it, and eighteen people were killed. Some in the crowd surrounding Jesus while he was teaching were speculating that, in both cases, the tragedy had occurred because of something the victims themselves had done. In our time, it would be like suggesting that the suffering of the citizens of Mariupol in Ukraine had been caused by their sinfulness as individuals.

Jesus says: no, that is not how it works. He is aware of the human tendency to try to rationalise suffering, of the ways we instinctively look for an explanation, perhaps derived from the sort of lessons we were taught as children in our best interests ('If you do that, this [bad thing] will happen'). Jesus is also aware of the ways we subconsciously try to distance ourselves from other people's suffering by suggesting to ourselves that it won't happen to us because we are not 'bad' people like they were. This can become a form of scapegoating, with different categories of people being shunned. But Jesus points out that each one of us is every bit as bad as the next person, and that any thinking which suggests otherwise is flawed, self-deceptive and leads us into more sin, including the sin of pride. Instead, we should be looking at our own brokenness, our own flaws, and asking God's forgiveness.

One can see why this reading is set for one of the Sundays in Lent. For it is partly an encouragement to us to examine our own consciences rather than spend time speculating about other people's – a teaching in the same vein as Jesus's parable about the mote and the beam. At first, it's a bit puzzling to find it followed by the apparently unconnected story of the fig tree that bore no fruit. However, in Jesus's time sudden death was a fact of everyday life, so on one level the story is pointing out to his hearers that, having examined their consciences, there was still time to produce good fruit, but there might not be much time.

The story of the fig tree contains other resonances too. On another level it's about ancient Israel, for which the fig tree and the vineyard are often used as symbols in the Scriptures. Jesus is urging his hearers that unless they produced the fruit of repentance, turning back to God, they would face destruction – as

had indeed happened by the time the Gospels came to be written, when after the rebellion against the occupying Roman forces in the year 66 CE, Rome inflicted great suffering on the people of Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed.

Our Gospel reading as a whole also begs the enormous question of ‘why suffering?’, if it is not the result of bad things the victims themselves have done. That is a huge subject, and there isn’t time this morning to go into all the different ways of thinking about it. But one thing the story of the fig tree does bring us face to face with is manure. For the fact is that, whatever the reason, manure happens.

Last week I was sitting with a friend who was thinking back over a time of turmoil and tragedy which was now past, and which he was beginning to see with the perspective of hindsight. He said to me, ‘I know this will sound corny, but I actually think it has made me a better person. More compassionate. More ready to help others.’ I opened my mouth to say that St Irenaeus of Lyon had said more or less the same thing in the second century, in one of the wisest theological reflections ever written on the mystery of suffering. But I shut it again. Nonetheless, there is truth in the fact that, because manure happens, a basic question we are confronted with is what we are to do with it.

What might we learn from the fig tree? Well, if you think about it, what a tree does is to take all the dirt that surrounds it and turn it into fruit. The first verses of today’s passage from Luke’s Gospel are about the ugliness and messiness that surround us, both the evil intent and the misfortunes of our lives – if you like, both the war in Ukraine and the pandemic. We don’t go looking for any of it,

but when it happens we somehow have to allow a process to take place within us that, like the fig tree, turns it into something fruitful. That's a very hard thing to come to terms with, but I suspect that if I asked each of you whether you had ever encountered an experience of it, there would be some nods. So one question which Jesus's story of the fig tree asks of us is: are we prepared to yield up our suffering through transformation to become a source of blessing to others?

Finally, this story raises the question of the difference that Jesus makes. We notice the dialogue between the owner of the vineyard and the gardener, which is often read as a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. (It was Mary Magdalene who encountered the resurrected Christ 'thinking him to be the gardener'.) As in a number of Jesus's other parables, here it is the gardener who is asking for a period of grace, like the manager who asks to go and settle accounts with his creditors. In those parables there is often a Jesus figure who makes things better.

But maybe there is something more fundamental still about this image, for it is a story about transformation that happens through a tree. The Christian faith itself is a story about transformation that happens through a tree. Looked at in that way, this story is a sort of mini-Gospel in which we are invited to allow the crucifixion to transform the ugliness and mess of our human lives and the limitations of our broken world into the glory of God's abundance.

Perhaps, then, the parable of the fig tree is partly a story about us (are we prepared to allow our suffering to become a source of blessing to others?) and partly a story about God (are we prepared to see how Christ's ministry and death

does that theologically on behalf of the creation as a whole?) The first is beautiful, the second astonishing.

So this little parable could even be said to be of fundamental significance to how we understand our faith. Beginning, as we always must, with the manure that happens.

Amen.