

Luke 13:1-9

Repent or Perish

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

6 Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Message: Repent or perish

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In our gospel reading we hear of some people who approached Jesus with a question. This happened while Jesus was teaching about discernment; being able to read the signs of the times, and about being able to judge amongst themselves what is right or wrong. These people asked about a group of Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Now, this phrase is curious, and seems to reflect a Jewish way of descriptive illustration. When they said the blood of the Galileans was mingled with that of their sacrifices, it doesn't mean that Pilate had them slaughtered on their own altars – rather, by using this phrase the people were saying that these Galileans who were killed were good Jews. They were faithful people who regularly followed their religious customs of sacrifice, prayer, diet, tithing. They were living good clean lives, doing what was expected of them.

Essentially, what the people who approached Jesus were asking was ‘how is it that this terrible thing happened to these good people? Was there some hidden sin that caused this disaster?’

This is similar to the time that some other people asked Jesus about a man blind from birth – who sinned? This man, or his parents? Obviously somebody sinned, because life is all about getting what we deserve, isn't it? Good people get good rewards, bad people reap what they sow – those who live by the sword will also die by the sword. This is the natural order of things, isn't it? If something terrible happened, then those people must somehow have brought their ruin upon themselves.

We still think this way today – we're still in the habit of blaming the victims for what happens to them. If only the poor would go get a job, if only that ADHD kid would buckle down and take their school work seriously, if only that woman hadn't gone out of the house dressed like that!

It makes sense to us that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. If something bad happens, then those people must have something bad inside them that they are hiding. That has to be it. Victim blaming has been with us for a long, long time, and that's because our minds crave order.

We need the world to make sense and follow rules. Objects fall toward the centre of the earth; matter and energy can be neither created nor destroyed; a body in motion will stay in motion. Everything should be predictable, and the way things are is the same as they have always been.

We find it difficult to deal with randomness and chaos, because our ego, which is basically our pride, wants to be in control. Needs to be in control. The Enlightenment folks thought they had it all sorted out. Scientific advances through the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries led people to think that this universe could be completely described, documented, and predicted. Tamed.

But since the time when Newton set his laws of a predictable universe in place, science has demonstrated that the world is not nearly as predictable as we would like to think it is. As soon as we change our perspective – either zooming in to view the very small, or zooming out to see a very broad picture, we find that chaos is an intrinsic element of creation.

For those who find this sort of thing fascinating, as I do, I invite you to the Langford study that is coming up in May. The Rev. Dr. Tim Reddish will speak to us about chaos as a creative tool of God; the very God who hovers over the turbulent waters and sets limits to the oceans of randomness.

So, those who follow science on any level deeper than simple Newtonian physics are privy to the fact that science is revealing that the world is much more random and chaotic than we would like to believe. This revelation makes many uncomfortable, just as those in Jesus' day were uncomfortable with the uncontrollable nature of their rulers and their environment. We like it when the world follows our rules – we like to be in control. When the world refuses to behave we just try to repeat our rules as though we can impose order through the force of our wills. And one of those rules that we repeat because it gives us some feeling of security is 'Bad things happen to bad people.'

And what does Jesus say in response to their question about the good men who died horribly? He tells them another story about 18 people killed when a tower collapsed on them, and asked them – were these men also sinners? Were they worse than the others around them? Did they deserve to be crushed by falling masonry?

And then he says a very curious thing. Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. We need to pause here, and think about this, because if we just skim through this, it sounds as

though Jesus is agreeing with them. It sounds like he's saying that the tower fell on them because they didn't repent – they were unrepentant sinners and that's why they died. But in fact, Jesus is saying something entirely different.

Let's go back to the original language to figure out what this really means – back to the Greek. The word we translate as repent comes from the Greek word metanoia. When we hear repent, we think about being sorry for something, we think of admitting our wrongs. But the word metanoia means much more than that – it really means to change one's thinking. So, that would include admitting when we are wrong and feeling remorse – but that is only one aspect.

Changing the way we think means to be open to a new perspective. It means being receptive to the mind of Christ. It means learning to look upon God, other people, ourselves, our world, and our institutions afresh – not being locked into our usual assumptions and prejudices.

Jesus said that if we don't repent that we were in danger of dying as they did. Is he saying that we deserve to have a tower fall on us? Well, it may be that some of us do deserve that, but that's not what Jesus is saying here. When Jesus speaks of people dying as those 18 did, what he means is that they died unexpectedly. None of those people crushed by the tower thought they would die that day – they just went to work as usual and death knocked on their door. They were not prepared.

So, this statement – unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did – means this: unless you change your thinking, then you will also die unprepared. Because it's not the method of dying that is important. We will all die, that much is sure. Some may be killed, as the Galileans were. Think of all those folks in Christchurch who were certainly not expecting to be slaughtered as they went to worship. Some will die in accidents, like the Jerusalem 18. Others will die from illnesses. The method of our death does not say anything about the state of our character – being murdered, hit by a car, or dying from cancer says nothing about our state as sinners. Longevity is not necessarily an indication of a good life, and premature death does not mean that we were bad.

So in his response Jesus took the focus off of the particular way in which these people died, and instead directing the people's attention towards how they live. 'Don't worry about death,' he said. 'Look at how you are living now, and examine your priorities.'

Jesus then went on to tell a parable about a fig tree. There are three characters in this story – the landowner, the gardener, and the tree. We can think of these three as God, Jesus, and the people of God. God is the landowner, the creator of the earth. Jesus is the gardener who tends to creation, and the tree is us.

In this story, we, the tree, are under judgement. We are not producing fruit – what good is a fig tree that doesn't produce figs? The landowner, God, has passed judgement. Cut it down, make room for something that will produce fruit. The gardener, Jesus, asks for more time – just one more year, and then make your decision.

Out of this short story we can take a few principles. One, and this seems obvious, fig trees should produce figs. There is a purpose to a fig tree, and likewise there is a purpose for us.

What is the fruit that we are producing? In Galatians, Paul writes that the fruit of the Spirit love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So if we do have the spirit of God, we should be producing these qualities in our lives. Our fruit could be that we are following the great commandment, loving God and loving our neighbours.

Our purpose is to produce fruit, and if we are not producing, as the fig tree was not, then we are useless. Less that useless, because as the landowner says, something else could be planted there. If we are not fulfilling our purpose, then we are just taking up space that could be used more productively by someone else.

The other theme of the fig tree story is patience. The gardener has patience; he asks for one more year. From this we can understand that we have been given a reprieve from judgement. There is still time for the fig tree to begin to bear fruit. There is still time for our lives to bear fruit.

Now to bring all our loose ends together. The time for the Galileans ended abruptly. The time for the workers in Jerusalem crushed by the tower ran out. At this moment we still have time, but be aware – it is borrowed time. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, or even this afternoon.

Isaiah writes 'Seek the lord while he may be found,' and this warning applies to us as well. But be aware that it is time sensitive. We don't have forever, because in this story, the gardener asks one more year, not forever. The time of reckoning may have been postponed, but it is coming. There will come a time when the clock will run out.

But for you and I, that day has not yet come. We still have time to be faithful; to be fruitful. Time to repent; to rethink. To re-examine the fruit that our lives are producing. We have time to ensure that we don't die as the Jerusalem 18 - unprepared.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - use today wisely and well, and the grace of God will be with you all of your days.

Amen.