

Sermon for Sunday 20th March 2022

Preacher: Rev Graham Naylor

Isaiah 55:1-9

1 Cor 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Judgement, Mercy & the Unfruitful Fig Tree

“At that very time”..... ‘At what time?’, we might ask! What is ‘that very time’, when some folk approached Jesus to discuss the brutality of Pilate towards some Galilean pilgrims to Jerusalem?

Luke divides his account of Jesus’ ministry into two main parts. Firstly, the ministry in the north, around Lake Galilee. Then, after the Transfiguration and the events of Easter loomed, Luke tells us (Luke 9:51) Jesus ‘set his face to go to Jerusalem.’ Luke then records Jesus’ teaching between then and our Gospel reading today... teaching that is predominately about repentance (the need to turn back towards God), final judgement and being prepared for it (what theologians refer to as eschatology)..... arguably not light topics!!

So, here we are..... Jesus having been teaching the crowds and the disciples sometimes more privately and some unnamed folk sidle up to him. They tell him about Pilate ordering or allowing the deaths of pilgrims at a major feast, possibly Passover, so the blood of the sacrifices and the blood of the pilgrims had been mixed. Luke here maybe emphasising the known brutality of Pilate and signposting to Pilate’s pending brutality towards Jesus, himself a Galilean.

We are not told why these folk feel the need to speak to Jesus about this. Maybe they wanted him to take political sides and condemn Pilate or give them permission to rebel against the Roman authorities in response to the bloodshed of their fellow Jews..... But Jesus, for whatever reason, takes the discussion elsewhere....

Jesus responds, as he so often does with a question, posed using two scenarios. His question is, to paraphrase, ‘Do you think these disasters happened because of the victims’ actions?’ Did the Galilean pilgrims die because of something they did? Did the people crushed by the falling tower die because of something they did?

Effectively, Jesus is saying, ‘Did it serve them right.....was it their own fault?’

Now, how often have you, have I, seen difficulties affect a person and we’ve said, ‘Serves them right..... they had it coming to them!’? It’s certainly a concept we see in much of the Old Testament..... people do good and God blesses them, people do bad and disaster befalls them. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, says God was not pleased with his people and they were struck down in the wilderness.....as an example, or deterrent, to us.

But how does that square with the fact that we also see difficulties and disasters befall folk who we would not describe as ‘bad’ or having done ‘bad’ things? In the OT, Job.....who was ‘righteous’, yet disaster after disaster affected him..... and I’m sure you can think of folk who suffer all manner of problems but, to us, seem not to deserve it.....

Jesus, as he does in other places (particularly in respect of sin resulting in sickness) seems to hold a tension by saying that bad things happening are not an indicator of being bad, though keeping open the possibility that bad actions have bad consequences.

But having asked the questions, Jesus makes a very clear statement about repentance..... about the need for people (all people) to turn towards God, to think differently..... something we focus on during Lent as we, like Jesus did literally, look towards Jerusalem and the events of Easter. Jesus’ concern in his teaching

has been the way God's people have not acted as God's people. They have not been an example to the people around them of how to live in relationship with God and with their neighbour. They have not been demonstrating love for God and love for neighbour..... And they need to change.....to repent.....

Having used the initial discussion as a springboard to point out that, without that turning around..... that repentance, people will perish [Jesus doesn't tread lightly here!], he tells a parable..... a story with a message.

A fig tree in a vineyard, quite a normal thing as they were used for supporting vines and aiding the fruiting of the vines, but it's not producing fruit after three years..... which means it was probably six years old as no fruit is picked in the first three years.

Now, I know a little bit about fig trees..... my birth mother lives in Turkey and just outside the garden wall, on one corner of the patio, is a fig tree. It wasn't planted there. In fact, she blames me for it being there as a result of throwing bits of uneaten figs over the wall into the scrub land around the pomegranate orchard! Not only was the fig not purposefully planted over the wall, but nothing has ever been done to it other than lop branches off as it's grown too big and blocked out the sun from the patio! But it produces an abundance of fruit every year..... without any watering or feeding..... Unlike the fig tree described in the story.

The vineyard owner wants to destroy the fig tree because it's not producing fruit. He's waited three years for the tree to mature and a further three..... but not one fig has materialised on the tree..... He's had enough waiting! But, for some unknown reason, the gardener pleads for time to put effort into digging around the tree, adding fertilizer (actions which are usually unnecessary with figs..... it's not that the gardener has failed in the preceding years!) in the hope fruit will appear. If it does, the tree survives the chop! If fruit doesn't appear, then it's firewood time!

So, what is Jesus telling us through this parable? Here, unlike when speaking about the storm on the lake a few weeks ago when I cautioned against treating the account as an allegory, we need to think about who or what the fig tree, the vineyard owner and the gardener might represent – although we must be careful not to push the imagery beyond what is reasonable! Most commentators agree that the vineyard owner is God and the fig tree is, firstly, the Jewish people, God's people, Israel..... Jesus has been warning that God's people were not behaving the way they should be..... they were like fig trees which were failing to produce figs! But commentators also say that the fig tree can be representative of the church and of individuals..... Some commentators say the gardener is representative of Jesus (after all, Mary mistook him for the gardener when she went to the tomb the first Easter morning!).

But what about this pleading for more time before the axe is swung at the tree? I wonder if it is talking symbolically of a delayed judgement? Of mercy? The fig tree is to be given time to change from being fruitless to become fruit-bearing..... but if it doesn't, then the threat of the vineyard owner can be carried out.....

What did we hear in our OT reading?

Is. 55:6-7

*Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

Seek the Lord while he may be found..... there is an implication that there is a time limit to when the Lord can be found....

In the parable of the fig tree, being chopped down for failing to be fruitful seems wholly justified, but a delay before destruction to see if things can be turned around is argued for..... what happens? Frustratingly, we don't know!!

Friends, what might it look like if, as a result of the mercy of God in delaying judgment against us, we turned around and produced 'fruit' where we are currently 'fruitless'?

When John the Baptist was describing pending judgment as an axe chopping down any tree not bearing fruit and folk should 'bear the fruits of repentance', he was asked what that looked like in practice. Paraphrasing, he told folk to share what they had above their basic needs with those who didn't have even the basic needs of life, to act honestly and justly (see Luke 3:7-14).

What might it look like for us, for us as a community of believers, for us as individuals, to 'bear the fruits of repentance' here in Lavenham in the 21st century. What would it look like if we took advantage of the mercy of God in not bringing judgment now but delaying it..... not for us to continue not being the people God is calling us to be and facing judgement anyway just a bit delayed, but to turn towards God (repentance) and become, if you like, fruitful and productive followers of Jesus?

As we go through Lent, let us ponder the question of whether we are going to choose to respond to God's mercy and turn towards God and become productive, or whether we're going to choose not to and face judgement..... Jesus presented a stark choice to his listeners, 'Unless you repent, you will perish as the Galilean pilgrims and the people crushed by the Tower of Silom did', a choice between repentance and judgement..... What will you choose? I urge each of us, myself included, to accept the mercy of God, seek the Lord while he may be found (in that delayed time before judgement), turn around, repent, become fruitful (in whatever way that looks for each of us and for us as a church) and, by doing so choose to avoid the consequence of facing judgement?

Amen