

Lent 3 C

March 11, 2007: St Aidan's & Wesley 10.30am

**Luke 13: 1-9**

We have all watched distressed scenes coming from an airport runway in Indonesia this week where dozens of people, some of them Australians, were killed when a plane burst into flames. In Jesus' day, many would understand this as an act of God; an act of judgement and punishment. Many would have said – they must have done something to deserve that.

There are still plenty of religious people today who are committed to this idea of God. You may have seen the interview, televised the day after the September 11 attacks, with Rev Jerry Falwell, the American evangelical personality. He said that 9 /11 was God's punishment for promiscuity in America. Falwell is a classic example of this Old Testament view of God... And I use that phrase because it must be honestly acknowledged that there are numerous Biblical examples of this way of thinking about God - especially the Old Testament. Yet let us not forget that the Book of Job, all 42 chapters of it *in that same Old Testament*, is dedicated to the showing that that's not what God is like. Today's reading from Luke shows us that Jesus agreed with Job.

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Jesus is talking here about two of the big news items of his day.

While some people on pilgrimage from Galilee were offering their sacrifices, Pilate sent his troops in and slaughtered them. Jesus draws on that well-known event to pose a question: Does this mean that those Galileans were worse sinners? Were they were being punished by God? He then gives his strong verdict: Absolutely not. *I tell you, NO!* are his words.

He then moves to a second seemingly well-known tragedy, and asks the crowd: [What about] those eighteen men who were crushed when that tower in Siloam fell, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

It was a construction accident we can all picture. Some labourers are toiling on the construction of a tower. Something goes wrong, the tower collapses – and eighteen men are killed. Were they worse sinners...is this why they died? Does a pain free life indicate God's favour, and an accident, such as this, indicate God's punishment? Again, at verse 5, Jesus gives an emphatic verdict: *I tell you, NO!*

The old superstition that those who have a good life must be in favour with God

and those who suffer calamity must be out of favour,  
is the first target of this passage.  
It needs to be named as a completely mistaken understanding of God.  
And we can say that because we have Jesus' word on it.

It is worth recalling that, during his sermon on the mount,  
Jesus said to the crowd,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... for God makes the sun to  
rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.  
[Matt 5.45]

That thought, I believe, gives us a much better handle  
on the question of whether God is orchestrating damage for some  
and prosperity for others.  
The answer comes straight from Jesus – absolutely not.

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But so far we've looked at only one aspect of this reading.  
And unfortunately we cannot ignore the elephant in the room –  
because it is sitting right in the middle of the passage.  
Here it is.

After describing the Galilean massacre, and the tower's collapse,  
Jesus goes on to say:  
But unless you repent  
you will all perish just as they did.

Despite making the strong point that accidents, massacres and disease  
are not God's punishments,  
Jesus seems unwilling to let us pretend that the good or the evil we do,  
does not matter.

His answer on the question of punishment, that day,  
was also a question.  
No, God is not sending punishment of these innocent.  
But while we're on tis subject:  
Who are you to probe, and to comment?  
Who are you to assign goodness and righteousness  
according to your criteria?  
Would you not be better considering your own lives?  
Who are you to judge?

Jesus' listeners that day wanted to offer commentary  
on the lives of other people.  
They wanted to asses who had been good, and who had been evil.  
But Jesus won't let them.  
Instead, and there is no avoiding it, he wants to talk about judgement.  
Their judgement.

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There's no avoiding the talk of judgement in the Bible.

I do believe in retaining the notion that the judgement of God rests upon our lives, as a central Christian teaching.

It is awfully important, however, to avoid mistakes about what this word judgement actually means.

And what's more

it's also very important to recognise that the Bible does not speak with one voice on this topic.

It is widely recognised that only after the Babylonian exile (mid 6<sup>th</sup> century BC) does the 'double-destination' model of the day of judgement enter into Jewish thought.

And within the New Testament – and even within Jesus own words – one can sense the tension between the teaching that God will save and reconcile all people and the alternative option that God will instead eternally punish some and only save an elect number.

We tend to retain an almost unbreakable connection between the fact that God will be the judge of our lives and a second prospect that does not necessarily follow - that there will also be condemnation and punishment.

Yet, does judgement – a proper reckoning of our lives before the One who gave us the gift of life – need to result in condemnation?

Might it not result in reform, in restoration, in reconciliation; even for those to whom God has meant nothing in their lifetime?

Are we the ones to say that God will not be able

to achieve a reconciliation for all people in his eternal purposes?

To be honest, I am not able to give that prospect a confident 'yes!'

However, I am also not game, as some are, to give it a confident 'no!'.

Sadly, so many of us enjoy being like those who stood with Jesus in Luke 13 and wanted to decide which people were the sinners and which were not; who will be found wanting in the judgement, and who will not.

But is this the way of Christ? The way of the God we have seen in Jesus Christ?

There will be a judgement, I believe that. Jesus speaks about it quite a bit.

But, mercifully, the task of judging has been appointed to someone

altogether more gracious than humankind has shown itself capable of being.

Bishop Hensley Henson in one of his published letters tells of receiving a precious cross:

I have fixed it up in the centre of the bookcase, which confronts my study chair and contains volumes to which I am accustomed frequently to have recourse. The top row is filled with the little volumes of the Loeb Classics (nearly 300 of them), the next row contains a number of volumes of history illustrating the culture of the ancient world. Below that is the history of the Popes, and other volumes (including the works of Shakespeare), which illustrate Christian civilisation. Below that again, are a whole shelf of larger volumes including the great Cambridge series of syndicated history, ancient, medieval and modern, and then all the volumes of our own National Biography. They form a not altogether inadequate illustration of modern civilization and culture, and there in the middle, I set the crucifix, whereon one may see both the final judge of

human life and the standard of his judgement. I have in mind to place there, if I can arrange it suitably, the legend of the *Te Deum* – ‘We believe that thou shalt come to be our judge’.

[Quoted by Davis McCaughey in his sermon at the inauguration of the Uniting Church in Australia, Sydney Town Hall, June 22, 1977.]

I feel, somewhat to my surprise,  
that the prospect of a judgement is the one thing that gives me hope....  
hope for this world, and hope for its people.  
Far from making me fearful, it leads me to believe there is hope for us yet.

I hold that hope because, with Bishop Henson,  
I feel fortunate to have come to know something about the Judge,  
and to have gained an insight into what will be the manner of his judgement.

... and there in the middle, I set the crucifix,  
whereon one may see both the final judge of human life  
and the standard of his judgement.

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Have you noticed that these statements about perishing  
are followed by the parable of the fig tree?

It is a parable about divine patience.

A judgement, yes.

A calling of the tree to account, yes.

But a patient and merciful accounting, nonetheless.

God will take the measure of our lives  
and the measure of our love.

That is what we believe in the Christian Church.

And yet the parable of the fig tree teaches us  
that God is a patient gardener.

God does not rush to judge the fig tree

because God knows that, in good time, it will bear good fruit.

Our task is not to judge others,

nor is it to set the timetable, or the criteria, or the manner of God’s judgement.

Our task is to look at our own lives, pray that they will bear good fruit,

and then trust and pray that a God whose love was so great as to go to a cross  
will go to lengths we may not be able to imagine

to ensure the salvation and reconciliation of all.

Revd P Walker