

LENT 3 7TH MARCH, 2010

LUKE 13: 1-9

Rev DAVID THIEM

THEME: '**ARE WE BEARING FRUIT OR JUST TAKING UP SPACE?**'

9am St Aidan's and 10.30am Wesley.

INTRODUCTION

This passage concludes a series of ominous warnings (found in Luke 12) about the urgency of the times, a reality that will have its disruptive effects on family life, economics, religious traditions and indeed human destiny.

In a manner reminiscent of John the Baptist, Jesus is preaching about the complete transformation of the world that is at hand and the need for those who have ears to hear and repent, lest they endure the full force of God's judgement. With respect to questions of sin and suffering, a common assumption among the people of Israel was that those who experienced pain and suffering were being punished by God, either for their own sins or for those of their ancestors. Jesus challenges this assumption.

MIDDLE

While not among our lectionary readings for today, in the book of Job we encounter this thinking. Job must have done something really wrong to have upset God so much that he loses his family, wealth, status etc. Job's companions cannot conceive of their friend's innocent anguish. Jesus himself is confronted by disciples with similar questions as they struggle to understand his ministry of healing and forgiveness: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'(John 9:2)

This question offers a prelude to Jesus' teaching in the final weeks of his life. The Galileans who suffered at the hands of Pilate, as well as the eighteen who were tragically killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, were no more notable in their errors than those who now stood before him. Jesus directs attention away from the perplexing question of theodicy and focuses instead on a doctrine that Paul develops in the letter to the Romans "all have and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23)

However, divine judgement, understood as the experience of the wrath of God, is not inevitable. Rather, it is contingent upon repentance (Greek - 'metanoia') which is the complete turning away from former beliefs and actions (such as idol worship) and acceptance of the proclamation of God's kingdom in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the hope offered in Jesus' parable of the Fig Tree.

The imagery is reminiscent of the scriptures in which the people of God are compared to a garden planted and tended by the Lord. Also the three years is representative of Jesus' ministry and the tree is often seen as the Jewish nation. Perhaps though, it is better to focus on the notion that the fig tree is reflective of the apathy and indecision that is widespread among those who hear Jesus' message.

Jesus' message is clear, that there is a day of reckoning coming. The parable of the Fig Tree has two Old Testament texts behind it that would have been well known to the listeners.

Micah 7:1 compares his search for justice in Israel to that of a frustrated harvester who finds no figs or grapes in the vineyard that he oversees. Isaiah's song of the vineyard (5: 1-7) also depicts the failure of a well-tended vineyard to produce fruit. The twist that Jesus gives to these familiar images is his emphasis on divine forbearance – if you like – a second chance.

Three years should have been enough time for the fig tree to be productive. The logical choice would have been to uproot the unproductive tree so that it does not take up valuable ground. However Jesus has the person responsible for the vineyard giving extra care to the tree for another year to see if it will bear fruit. Here Jesus shows the extravagant nature of God's mercy which is an important motif in Luke's Gospel. Still people need to respond positively to God else they, like to the fig tree bearing no fruit, will be cut down.

TEACHING FOR US FROM THE GOSPEL FOR TODAY.

1. First, we are reminded that God doesn't cause nasty things to happen because of our wrongs or family dys-functions in faith or life.

I can remember a horrible saying when there had been a tragedy or a series of tragedies, -“ I wonder what they did to deserve this? Maybe they have offended God!” This is illogical, irrational thinking – disasters happen and sometimes they happen to the most faithful of Christian people. Jesus reminds us that God doesn't punish us that way..

2. Second, during this season of Lent, it is a time when we are reminded to nourish our faith through prayer, reflecting on God's word, sharing in worship, caring for those around us. We are called to bear the spiritual fruits spelled out in Galatians 5:22 of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Hence we need to take stock of our lives and turn afresh to God, rejecting the areas of our lives that separate us from the love of God.

Amen.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, you come to us with gracious love. You take us as we are. But in love, you do not leave us as we are. You love us enough to judge us, to correct us, to hold us to account – in love.

Give us the grace to see your judgement of us as part of your grace toward us, to see our lives in the light of your truth, to grow, to change, and to be reborn into the people you would have us to be.

Courageously let us listen to what you have to say to us, to receive what you have to give us, even if what you have to tell us is the truth, even if what you desire to give us is judgement.

Amen.