

Luke 13:1-9.
Is 55:1-9

Turn to God.

Jane Ward-Hall

At first sight it's hard to see much connection between our Old Testament and Gospel readings. They certainly have a different tone. To me the Isaiah passage seems gentler, more encouraging (the type of reading I much prefer!)

The gospel passage sounds harsher, maybe even confronting, a sort of "wake up and listen" sort of message. We have the first section where Jesus is responding to some information, followed by a parable, which as always includes a deeper meaning. On reflection I've come to see that the 2 readings meld together well. The Old Testament illuminating the New in a helpful way. They both invite us to draw closer to God.

The prophet Isaiah reports God as saying "Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live." V3. Words like these cause me to respond "yes, Lord I want to do this, please help me". The word "come" is repeated 6 times in these 9 verses. It's an invitation. Telling us of God's faithfulness to Israel and us, His love and mercy always available especially if we keep turning our attention to Him. But it also gives us other key information, that our thoughts and our ways are not the same as God's. He thinks differently, sees things differently. His ways are higher than ours. We are finite. God is infinite. Nothing is impossible for Him. It's a fact I'm so grateful for, giving me hope that the mess our world is in can, by God's grace, be sorted out.

Who is this amazing God we worship, what's He really like? It's something I often talk to people about in spiritual direction. What we imagine God to be like will depend largely on the close relationships we've experienced especially in early childhood. Negative, painful, shameful experiences can blind us to the goodness of God, His radiant splendour, His merciful love that's available to all of us, all of the time.

Luke tells us that Jesus was told of the murder of some Galileans. This must have been extremely alarming as many of Jesus followers were from that region. Jesus knows the question on their minds is "Did this happen to these people because they were worse sinners than others?" The underlying question "Did God cause this, was He punishing these people?"

Do we sometimes blame God for the painful things that happen to us? I think blame is a form of self protection. We often rationalise our thoughts, behaviour and experiences by seeing that the fault lies with others.

I can give you a powerful example of this from my own life. Many of you will know that Terry and I celebrated our 14th wedding anniversary on Ash Wednesday. As my children are in their 40's it's no surprise that Terry is my second husband. Going through a divorce was agony. The grief, rejection, shame and fear, letting go of a life built over 32 years, was devastating. It suited me to put all the blame at my ex's door. I tried to trust God but then I just couldn't imagine the very happy situation I now enjoy. It took me a long time to remember and be grateful for the good years I shared with my first husband.

Humanly we like logical, direct comparisons, this happens because of that, cause and effect. It helps us cope with what we can't understand. What we can't control!

But God sees things differently. In our Luke passage Jesus makes clear with a resounding "No", repeated twice, that the people that died was not because of any greater sin or worse behaviour on

their part. God punishes nobody. The pain and suffering we go through are not because God sends it. If that was the case the cross would count for nothing. We believe that Jesus took the punishment we deserve for all our sin when He died for us that first Good Friday.

When Jesus says “Repent or perish”, He is putting a choice before us. Repent means turn around. Do we turn towards Jesus or away from Him? We can seek His new life in us or chose bitterness, resentment, destructive forces. Do we want to live a life where His yoke is easy and His burden is light? Keeping close to Jesus is the way, turning our attention frequently to Him.

Jesus, like the father in the prodigal son, is waiting arms open wide for us to return to Him. To live, really live in gratitude for all Jesus has done for us, we need to keep seeking His ways through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That’s why the confession part of our service is so important. When we own our wrong doing, confess our failures and receive God’s forgiveness, it sets us free! We can’t live our best life, the life God wants us to live, a life that is fruitful for the Kingdom of God unless we turn to God.

This leads us nicely to consider the parable. The tree isn’t producing fruit. The landowner wants it cut down but the gardener saves it, asking for more time, saying that he will dig around the roots and give it fertiliser. Hopefully it will be fruitful next year.

Could the tree be a metaphor for us? What is the fruit we are producing? Think about a cherry tree, it doesn’t produce fruit through striving and willpower. The cherries develop naturally when the environmental conditions are right. One thing I’m certain of is the fruit referred to by Jesus is not our achievements, how successful our careers are etc. I think it’s the spiritual fruit listed in Galatians 5:22. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.” These are God’s gift but we can notice if we are experiencing more of these qualities in our lives.

Is this parable giving us guidance if we are feeling fairly fruitless? How to improve our fruit bearing conditions. What might be fertiliser for us? Spending more time in silence and prayer, remembering who Jesus says we are, as written in the Bible. Maybe some new spiritual input, a course, time to consider a quiet day or retreat?

Who will dig over our roots? Someone we can trust to share deeply with. Feel safe enough with to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We need each other to grow in faith.

It occurs to me that we are wrong when we say “my faith is private I don’t need to talk to anyone about it.” Life is all about relationship with God and each other. God can use others to help us grow spiritually. New beginnings are always possible. What matters is who we are becoming in Christ, growing in love for the sake of others.

This, in part, is what I see as one of the purposes of our Transforming Trinity project. To dig over our roots and become rich soil that offers a welcoming, hospitable environment where fruit can grow, others can enjoy community and respond to Jesus’ invitation to Come to Him. Exciting times!

23 March 2025