

Third Sunday of Lent 2025 (23rd March)

Luke 13:1-9

A Reflection by Julie Tate, Lay Worship Leader

May I speak to the glory of God , Father Son and Holy Spirit

As I reflected on today's gospel, I thought about the terrible Russian war on Ukraine, the ongoing situation in Israel and Gaza, the pupils I have taught who died tragically early and other terrible events in my life and lifetime .

You will have your own list, your own thoughts, your own tragedies. We all have them.

Not much has changed since the time of Jesus. Tyrants are still acting, towers are still falling, and tragedies are still happening.

For all of us those kind of events continue to raise questions about God, fairness, and mortality.

They challenge our beliefs and hopes, and some might say illusions, that there is some all-knowing, all-powerful Magical Other, out there who, if we just believe, pray, and behave rightly, will make sure none of those terrible things happens to us or those we care about.

They contradict our notions of fairness - that people get what they deserve, that the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished.

And of course they remind us of our own mortality and that life is fragile, short, and uncertain.

I'm sorry, but actually I don't want to hear: "God is in control," "Everything happens for a reason," "Just have faith," or any other trite, shallow, and tired platitude that so often gets spoken in these situations.

I want to know why these things happen, don't you? I want some explanation and a way to make sense of it all. Maybe you do too.

But in today's Gospel I'm afraid Jesus isn't helping with any of that.

He doesn't give a solution to our questions. He doesn't offer an explanation or a way of understanding why some terrible things happened.

Interestingly, At the time of Jesus there was a received wisdom that sickness was the result of an individual's sin. The view was that God punished people in their lifetime for the evil they had done.

And so there were also unspoken rules and hidden assumptions, that people deserved their fate, because somehow they were worse than other people. This of course is what Job's comforters tried to do – to say that Job suffered because he sinned, when of course the book tells us that he hadn't.

But Jesus makes it very clear that suffering is not due to wrong doing, saying most memorably in the gospel of Matthew that God '... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.'

And so we know that this is just the way the world works. At present we live in a fallen, imperfect world – but one where we have freedom and choice.

CS Lewis said, 'free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having'. And he knew a great deal about pain and suffering , saying after the early death of his wife "Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. The death of a beloved is an amputation."

So bad things happen to good people and innocents often suffer. But we clearly know that the people who died in the Grenfall Tower did not deserve their fate and that young soldiers dying in Ukraine fighting against tyranny do not deserve theirs.

But what if these things are not the point of today's gospel but actually the intensifiers of today's gospel? And what if they are in our lives as well?

This doesn't mean that we should diminish the losses in our life and our time, but that we actually feel them even more acutely and let them call us into a better way of being. They are not the reason for the tragedies happen, but rather, given that they will happen, we have a choice about how we respond.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that 'a Christian is someone who shares the sufferings of God in the world.' We believe that God weeps with us.

Terrible tyrants, toppling towers, and terrifying tragedies intensify the preciousness of life and bring greater awareness of what we are doing with our lives.

They intensify the value of relationships and invite us to consider how we are treating creation and one another. They intensify the meaning of this moment and remind us that nothing should be wasted or taken for granted.

And very importantly they intensify the urgency and need to redeem the past and open our hearts to a new and better way.

Perhaps this intensification is the reason Jesus does not deal with the **why** question. He is moving the focus away from **why** these kind of things happen, and placing it on **how** we live in a world where these things do happen.

How is usually a better question than why. How tends towards the future, why tends toward the past.

How do we not lose ourselves to the pain and tragedies of our lives and world? How do we keep our hearts soft and keep hope? How do we live amidst death?

“Repent.” That’s Jesus’ answer to the how question, and he says it twice in today’s gospel. “Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Perhaps our understanding of repentance is too small. We make it only about behaviour and changing from bad to good, but Jesus is very clear that he is talking about much more.

In today’s Gospel he’s not offering a cause and effect explanation, he’s offering a choice between life and death. Jesus is calling on us to reorientate our lives towards him – inviting us into a new relationship that requires our constant participation.

And so that choice is always before us. Every moment is a moment of potentially being aware of the divine presence, of hope and new life. The only question is whether we will “turn aside to see this great thing.” Just as Moses did when he encountered God in the burning bush.

Will we turn aside to find the courage, hope, and perseverance needed in the moment?

Will we turn aside to see the opportunity for love, compassion, forgiveness?

Will we turn aside from the fear, busyness, and distractions that keep us from living the life that God wants for us?

What if repentance for Jesus is continually turning back to life in a world where terrible things happen? What if repentance is far more than just saying sorry, but rather continually committing to going in a better direction?

Jesus invites us to reimagine how we might live beside, and respond to, the tyrants, fallen towers, and tragedies in our lives and world.

The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree seems harsh, but we also find compassion here in the second chance given to the fruit tree to be fruitful. God is the God of second chances and much more. God's forgiveness and love is without limits. The parable intends that we should seize the day and seek to live fruitful lives from now on.

This is our work to do. No one else can do it for us. If things are going to be turned around then it's up to us. But remember – with a great deal of help from God. Remember these words of Jesus from John's Gospel "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."