

LENT 3
11/03/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55:1 - 9
Psalm 63:1 - 8
I Corinthians 10:1 - 13
Luke 13:1 - 9

Unless you repent...

The stories in the Gospel are a challenge. The first one, concerning disasters that befell people, reflects the belief of those times that people who suffered calamity did so as a punishment for sin. Jesus does not counter this and, unfortunately for us his *...unless you repent you will perish as they did...* leaves us with a continuing and troubling sense of a vengeful God. Even in our day when scientific knowledge makes us more acutely aware of the links between cause and effect, people will still make a link between calamity and the wrath of God. Even people who think nothing of God will suddenly ask when their child is taken ill, their spouse leaves them, or someone they love is killed: "Why did God allow it?" God is expected to override all lack of faith or human responsibility, and all gaps in our knowledge. When calamity strikes the discovery that we are not in control of life still sends people searching for someone or something to blame. Human guilt is still projected onto the idea of a punishing God and people will form the view that God is either being nasty to them, or they must somehow deserve what has happened.

Faced with a discussion about two fatal calamities Jesus contradicts the view that those who died like this were **worse** sinners than others. He broke the link between enormity of sin and sudden, calamitous death. But then having overcome one hurdle he goes on to say *unless you repent you will perish as they did*. There still seems to be a sense of threat here and a core of support for a theology of just deserts. This is an awkward text. What is happening is that, having debunked one idea, Jesus is still concerned with the urgency of the time and the need for people to be awake to what God is doing among them in his journey to Jerusalem. It is for this reason that the Gospel is linked with the reading from Corinthians in which Paul is concerned to show that the ancient people who were liberated from Egypt nevertheless had to choose God afresh every day. They could not dine out on their freedom; their journey remained a walk of faith, daily chosen. And from the reading in Isaiah we see God, who is a restoring God, does not think or act as mortals expect. Living by faith involves a discipline of being ready to forgo our normal categories of understanding in order to comprehend what God is doing.

The element of challenge does not lessen with the parable of the fig tree which follows. The fig tree is a symbol for the people of Israel, who have been tended by the prophets for no result and the owner's patience is running out. Only the intervention of the Gardener preserves its life for one more year. There is still some sense of a link between cause and effect. But the nub of the issue is that this story presents a call to fruitful living. The people are being called to change. To engage with and respond to the nurture they have been given over a long period of time.

The concept of **judgement** in these stories is one we would rather avoid. We associate judgement with negative criticism and divine displeasure. Judgement, and especially judgementalism, doesn't sit well with liberal values like tolerance. Judgement is a fundamental component of the covenant between God and the people but it does not carry the same juridical or legal significance we associate with it. Judgement is God acting in such a way as to maintain the covenant relationship. When God acts on behalf of the people they are challenged, helped to avoid error, lead to a new place, acquitted of wrongdoings and set free to live a new life. An act of judgement is much the same as an act of salvation, a gesture by which God aims **to preserve the divine relationship with the people**, despite their failures. When the NT declares judgment is on its way, it means the merciful God is once more having pity on the people and has moved towards them to forgive, to heal and restore. When God acts in judgement often what the people receive is not their just deserts. We might well pray for an act of judgement in our time.

Jesus on the way to Jerusalem is in judgment mode, demonstrating the power of God to release and restore, challenging false ideas about calamity and guilt. His use of the parable of the fig tree tells the people their relationship with God still matters. And faith is not separate from an obedient response. In hearing these stories it is needful to remember that neither repentance nor sin should be understood in the moralistic terms so beloved of popular imagination. To sin is to shoot wide of the mark, or to stray from the path. Repentance involves recovering the path, getting on target again. Seen in this way Jesus' call to repentance was a call to refocus on the source of life. Having your friends subject to one of Pilate's atrocities, or having a tower fall on them would be disaster enough. But the real calamity would be to be so obsessed with measuring the sins of those who died and who to blame, that we lost sight of the mercy of God and ceased to respond in a faithful, fruitful way. The people associated with the calamities were called to repentance because they had become self-absorbed, concerned with the sins of the sufferers, and who to blame. They were not noticing the prophet who was among them, to challenge them to live a new life.

In the greater context of the journey to Jerusalem Jesus himself will suffer calamity and innocently lose his life in the most cruel and savage way. Even Pilate said he could find no fault in him. What happens to him crosses out the link between guilt and reward that is under debate in the first story today. People still struggle to see how God was in the events to which Lent leads us. But here God, the source of value and power, chooses the cross to reveal true value in self-giving love and power in powerlessness. Jesus hangs on the cross, stripped of all religious pretensions, unprotected and undelivered by God, resisting evil to the last. This is not the same picture of the God whom others call in to fill the gaps, to take responsibility for their life, or to support their particular ideology or quest for power. But this is God for us, and its symbol is a cross, which seems like an unfruitful tree. But it is soon revealed to be the place where the ultimate mercy and patience of God is extended towards all. This sign is the means by which God cultivates our interest in living, not for ourselves, but for him who gave his life in this way.

The stories in Luke present us with a challenge. On one hand we have to struggle over the seeming vengeful nature of the first story. On the other hand it would be possible to lean on the patience of the Gardener and avoid any cutting edge at all. We should fix on neither of these extremes. Instead the gift of Lent is that the cross comes steadily more clearly into view. This is the place where all that God offers us is made clear. The call

to repent marks our opportunity return to the source, to embrace the cross anew, and travel from here refreshed in the knowledge of God's gift of merciful love. In this way our Lenten journey means our lives will not be lost in self-absorption, or trivial concerns. Instead we have the chance to gain access to the real treasure God wills for us an all people, and live in the wonder of this gift.