

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63

Luke 13:1-9

On Fear

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In an online [article this week](#), the [Ethics Centre's](#) Simon Longstaff remarked upon a couple of the more cynical modes of political self-promotion available to our parliamentary representatives. These are appeals to the voter's self-interest though either fear or greed.

Of these, greed is probably the less effective, perhaps not least because most voters are doing reasonably well already, or because we're less confident that politicians are reliably able to tweak the economy in our favour.

But fear can work very well. "Vote for me, and I will protect you from... [insert deep fear here]" – asylum seekers, woke city millennials, housing density increases in your area, fluoride in your drinking water, or whatever. Protection from threats like this – if "protection" is the right word – are often possible with the stroke of pen; observe the political style of a particular president across the Pacific.

Vote for me, and I will keep you safe. This works, to the extent that there is sufficient fear in the electorate.

The interesting thing about this political method for our thinking this morning is how close it seems to what Jesus says in today's gospel reading. After hearing of a couple of local political and natural disasters, Jesus remarks – Do you think your prospects are any better? "I tell you...unless you repent, you will all perish as they did". This sounds more than a little like, Unless you vote for me, you're all going to die.

Certainly, many Christians have read such texts in just this way – whether in fear for their own well-being or as a weapon with which to threaten others. The proverbial fatal encounter with a bus after leaving the evangelistic meeting comes to mind: what will happen to your soul if you are run over by a bus on leaving today, unrepentant?! Jesus looks here like he might have made a pretty good politician of the cynical type.

And yet, even if this is what Jesus does mean here – or what Luke thinks he means – the Scriptures know more broadly that the promise will not be honoured. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are not persuaded that goodness amounts to long and prosperous life. But even more central to Christian faith is the problem of Jesus' own experience, because he himself suffers what is described in this troubling little text: *his* blood is "mixed" with his sacrifice when *upon him* falls all the towering weight of religious and political opposition.

This is to say that the "unless" – *unless* you repent – and the "perish as they did" cannot mean that simply repenting will see these threats resolved. And so "repent" must be less straightforward than simply "confessing all my bad stuff", and "perish as they did" is much less straightforward than just dying young.

The problem with the politics of fear – and the religion of fear – is that it fights fire with fire, leaving us only with ... fire – the fire of fear.

To relate to anything in the mode of fear is *always* to be fearful of that thing, even as we imagine ourselves to be protected from it. If we truly fear the judgement of God, then we will wonder whether everything we have done to protect ourselves is yet enough. This is because the protection is precisely what we ourselves have constructed, and it will likely be about as reliable as the kinds of protections many of our politicians promise us. To hear that we should repent is fine, but have I repented of everything which matters? Have I missed something? What if God *really* knows me better than I know myself? – surely a truly terrifying thought here, if I believe what Jesus says. How can I repent of what God knows but I do not?

And so, on the simplest – and probably most common – reading, our text today should strike horror into everyone who takes it seriously. Who could possibly be saved? Who could be confident that they repented of *everything*? The fear of God which demands repentance creates the fear that I have not repented enough, not repented of everything I should have. And so the fear of God begets the fear of God. There is nothing liberating or good-news-y about this.

How then could what Jesus says here be true? What could repentance mean, which makes sense of the fact that righteousness does not prevent suffering, but also calls us to a new, deeper, richer experience of ourselves and of God?

The thing of which we should repent is fear itself. It is fear the crowds bring to Jesus – Did you hear what Pilate did to those poor people? Did you hear about everyone crushed under the tower? And Jesus affirms their worst fear – that this is unpredictable, that they are no different from the others who got up in the morning and launched into their normal day but didn't come home that night.

So, when Jesus says, “Unless you repent, you will perish as they did”, he cannot mean “Such things do not happen to the faithful”. For such things will happen even to Jesus himself, whom we see as the definition of faithfulness.

Rather, fear itself is the problem – the fear with which the crowds told the story, and so the fear by which they defined their place in the world. The possibility of dying “as they did” is not the possibility of dying early, but of dying under the cloud of the fear of death – of its unpredictability, its capriciousness, its finality.

And so, “Unless you repent, you will perish as they did” is not about how we might die; it is about how we are living. The right kind of “fear” of God does not keep death at bay, but it does keep death in its place. The right kind of “fear” of God refuses to live under the shadow of death, or any of death's many friends. When Jesus says here “repent”, it is a call to repentance of a way of living which imagines that our lives are just about us – that our longevity is our importance. And so he calls us to repent of the fear which separates and isolates, to repent of the fear which causes us to judge others, to repent of the fear of judgement by others. These are the fears which a cynical leader magnifies and manipulates.

None of this is to say that we should not respect what is dangerous. Many who die young do so because they are foolish – which is to say, disrespectful of how the world usually works.

And neither does this soften what Jesus puts to the people in the text today. The fearless life is a difficult one, more so than any mere moral repentance we might make to try to keep God (and death) at bay. Our fears can be a kind of comfort to us because we are able to take control to protect ourselves from them, whether by building bigger walls or by trading with the powers which threaten us, so they'll leave us alone.

Last week I finished the sermon with a passage from Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus tells the people to "consider the lilies". I didn't prepare today's reflection with that passage in mind, but it seems pertinent again, only today here it is in Luke's variation on the same teaching:

*<sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! <sup>29</sup> And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. <sup>30</sup> For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup> Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*

*<sup>32</sup> 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

How we perish is not the question. The question is, how we live.

Unless we repent of the fears which constrain us, our living will be just a kind of continuous perishing: to live captive to the fear of death is to imagine that, in the end, God *is* death, that death is God.

But for those who live without fear, their death just happens to be the last thing they do. To recall from St Paul: "If we live, we live [in] the Lord; if we die, we die [in] the Lord. So we whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (Romans 14.8).

So, lift up your hearts, Jesus says. And live.

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