

## More than a second chance



Lent 3 Luke 13:1 – 9

In what could be seen as one of the left-overs of the hippie generation of the 60's, we now have the idea of 'karma' imbedded in our culture. The idea that if you do something wrong or hurtful, you will be punished at some point, and the sooner the better. Instant 'karma' is a bit of an ideal. The embarrassing and offensive party guest who gets pulled over for drunk driving on the way home - instant karma. This concept of karma bears little or no relation to the Buddhist or Hindu teaching that the word comes from, which is the accumulation of all that you have done in this life determines what happens in the next life. It's as if bad Christian theology – the idea of punishment for sin - has found a word to attach itself to. Or rather, bad philosophy, because those who talk of 'karma' aren't followers of Jesus the Christ. But the idea has come from bad Christian theology. Despite Old Testament teaching, Jesus teaching, and Paul's teaching, somehow this idea that we receive punishment in our life for our bad deeds in our life has persisted for thousands of years. And it plays out in both directions. People who are going through tough times, or bad health, or financial stress say, "What have I done to deserve this?" And others, looking at people's misfortune say, "They must have led a bad life to end up like that." The idea of cause and effect runs deep in our psyche, and so, when something happens, people think it's an effect and look for an immediate cause. And that attitude can lead to only two possible outcomes - guilt or gloat. While we are not told what is happening in this story of the people who come to Jesus with an account of an atrocity, his answer points to it being gossip, an attitude of gloating. And Jesus takes this attitude of 'deserving punish' and attacks it in two ways:

- It's not about you being more guilty than others or others, being more guilty than you, we are all human, separated from God, and destined for death, unless we turn from our ways and follow God's way.
- The basis for our appraisal by God is not about sin but about our actions in the world. Have we demonstrated to the world that we follow way of love, mercy and justice?

We have no idea as to the historical correctness of these two stories of people suffering; we can only say that they are plausible. Pilate had a reputation in Rome for unnecessary harshness in his treatment of the Jews, and a building collapse is not unknown. The point is that such atrocities and disasters are not some special sign of God's displeasure or judgement. At best they are a reminder of the precarious nature of life and that there is no better time to seek God's blessing than now. One of John's stories concerns a similar, incorrect attitude to suffering and sin. When Jesus meets a man who was born blind, the disciples ask, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" And Jesus answers, "Neither! His blindness is not a punishment from God, but an opportunity to display God's grace."

*In the Anglican Lectionary, this reading was listed for last week, coinciding with the atrocity in New Zealand. An ideal opportunity to preach this message against 'deserving punishment'. Just as there is no room for 'they deserve it' in bushfires, even deliberately lit ones, or floods, there is no place for any ideas of divine judgement or that the people in that mosque deserved what happened. There is only an opportunity to display the grace and love of God.*

After answering gossip with a message about repentance, Jesus then shifts the argument to another track. Life with God is not about sin, it's about showing the world that you are living with God. The owner of the vineyard doesn't condemn the fig tree because the tree did something wrong. It wasn't stealing space from the vine, or tripping people with its roots or dropping branches on people. It was condemned for not doing what a fig tree should do; produce figs! When Micah asks his rhetorical question, "What does the Lord require of you?", the answer isn't 'avoid sin and obey the Law'. It's do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God. Not that Jesus or scripture is silent on sin and Law but whenever Jesus spoke about the Law, it was the weightier matters of love and justice, and whenever he spoke about sin it was to remind people that we are all sinners before God and we all need to do that turning around towards God that is the basis of repentance.

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Sometimes it feels like the Lectionary readings during Lent are intended to inspire the maximum amount of guilt in the listener. And it would be a shame if that was your reaction today because the heart of this message from Jesus isn't, "You're all sinners", it's the grace contained in "Let it alone for one more year and I will dig around it and put manure on it." The wonderful message that in the death and resurrection of Jesus is not just a second chance to be with God, but all the grace, resources and inspiration that we need to become the people of God producing love, mercy and justice in the world. Life is not about the dynamics of guilt or gloat, it's not about karma or testing; it's about accepting and offering the grace and love of God.

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