**Suspended sentence**

*Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9*

*23rd March 2025*

In the recent, award winning film *Conclave* there is a highly dramatic moment, the significance of which might have been lost on some viewers. We are in the Vatican, in the Sistine Chapel, where the voting for a new pope is in full swing. The main organizer of the event, Cardinal Thomas Lawrence’s mind is in turmoil. He has received secret information about some of the main contenders and he feels his duty to discredit them one by one, until he eventually finds himself as one of the frontrunners of those who remain. Having vigorously denied several times that he himself was interested in the job, we see him actually voting for himself. And just as he is casting his vote there is an almighty crash, windows are shattered and a bomb blast shakes the whole building. It is not said in so many words, but the visual effect is that of a ‘divine judgement’ on his self-serving, unworthy action.

Well, the idea of ‘divine judgement’ features prominently in our NT reading from Luke’s Gospel. Jesus is confronted by the common belief of his times that bad things happen to sinful people, as a result of divine judgement, whilst good fortune is a sign of righteous living. We may want to say that we don’t think like that anymore, but the truth is that the belief is still alive and well even in our own times. As recently as the Los Angeles wild fires in January this year there have been views expressing beliefs that it was God’s punishment for the sinful living of the people of the area. But we don’t even have to go to the spectacular ‘acts of God’ as they are called for insurance purposes, we all have residues of the belief in our own hearts when personal tragedy hits us. ‘Why me?’, ‘how did I deserve’ this?’- we ask. And when we do, perhaps unwittingly we have a picture of God, who keeps a score of every human act and deals out the relevant deserts there and then.

But Jesus emphatically denies it. These events, these disasters are not God’s punishment. Sometimes they are caused by human action. The responsibility for the gruesome death of those Galileans mentioned by Jesus’ questioners was caused by the Romans, not by a punishing God as a judgment. And sometimes bad things just happen, like a tower falling down and randomly killing people. It is nothing to do with the sinfulness or otherwise of those involved. Luke, the gospel writer positions this story right after Jesus’ teaching about the importance of interpreting the times. So that may explain why Jesus turns the conversation to the question of repentance. Almost as if he was saying, ‘do not try to fathom out other people’s fate, or worry about their sinfulness, look to yourselves and repent, time may not be on your side.’ This is what we want to explore today: the importance of the time for making changes.

Well, we are in the time of Lent when we remember Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem, where he would be captured, tried and executed. It is a time for us to picture ourselves going with him and looking into ourselves to learn about our need of repentance. The word ‘repent’ can be understood in different ways. Repentance is a major idea in the gospels. It launches the ministry of John the Baptist, it’s taken on by Jesus as we heard in our reading today and it is a particularly crucial feature of Luke’s Gospel, who apparently uses the word more than all the other gospels put together. And most helpfully, he uses it in different contexts filling it with different meanings.

In common usage the usual way is to relate repentance to a particular action or thought and regretting our part in it. But we are also familiar with the original meaning of the Greek word m*etanoia* which refers to a deep, transformative change of heart, a turning round that will affect the whole of our life. It is a kind of total reorientation of our outlook in the light of which we begin to see things differently.

As a spiritual discipline in Lent repentance may have this broader meaning of *discovery,* when we are not so much concerned with individual sins, or failures, but are led to learn some wider, deeper truths about ourselves and about our relationship with God. Accompanying Jesus, hearing the things he says, watching him do the things he does, may help us to get to know ourselves better, face up to our hidden anxieties, find out our real needs. When he talks about the lost sheep and lost coin, repentance may mean for us the *desire to be found*. There are times, when we do feel lost, when we hit a dry patch, when God and faith become hollow and we feel ready to give up. The Lenten message is that God never gives up on us. Through the prophet Isaiah the call is issued to the languishing exiles: ‘*Seek the Lord... come to me and listen to my words.... hear me and you will have life.’* With the Lord there is the promise of rich, imperishable food for free, water for the thirsty and the full joy of the fat of the land.

These words may have a dissonant sound in our ears just now. Not only because we regard Lent as a time for fasting, to give up chocolates, meat or other rich foods, perhaps withdraw from our favourite pastimes, but also because it reminds us of those in poor, or war-torn countries, who struggle with not enough food, sometimes not enough even for mere survival. Of course, we can spiritualize these things and say that God’s offer is about spiritual well-being, and of course they are that as well. But the God we know in Jesus is concerned with our whole being. Jesus did pronounce forgiveness of sins, but he also restored the sight of those who couldn’t see, he cured those suffering from leprosy and hosted a picnic for 5000 hungry people. If we go along with him, we too have to attend to people’s physical needs and cannot forget those parts of the world crying out for the basic necessities of life.

Coming to Jesus’ parable of the unproductive fig tree we are led to consider another aspect of repentance. It may remind us of our own *un-used gifts* and inactive capabilities. Are we leading as fruitful a life as we were made for? Are we doing all we can to enhance the life of those around us? These are good questions for Lent. For three years running the owner in the parable kept looking for figs on the fig tree. And he had every reason to do so.

The fig tree is one of world’s oldest cultivated trees, which is widely grown around the Mediterranean in its more than 150 different varieties. In favourable conditions it can produce two or three crops a year. It has great dietary as well as healing properties. The fruit is a rich source of simple sugars, minerals and fibre, which aids good digestion, controls blood pressure and the leaves are said to have anti-diabetic properties. So, it is created to be a very useful addition in that rich and free provision the prophet is talking about in his vision of a bright future.

But, more than that, the fig tree also has a great symbolic meaning in the Bible. It is the sign of national wealth, peace and prosperity, ultimately the sign of God’s peaceable kingdom, where people may sit undisturbed under their own vine and fig tree (Hosea 4:4). It is also used as a symbol for Israel, the people of God, whose calling is to be a blessing to all nations. So, with all this in mind, yes, the owner in Jesus’ parable had every reason to look for the fruitfulness of the fig tree. And not finding it – to pronounce the judgement: it is to be cut down. It’s just good gardening practice, isn’t it? It makes economic sense, he wants to grow something useful, an unproductive tree merely takes up the space which could be turned to better use. This is how some of Israel’s national disasters were interpreted; they came about as ‘divine judgement’ for the people’s faithlessness and unproductivity in their covenant relationship with God.

But in Jesus’ parable along comes the gardener and asks for more time for the tree. A kind of suspended sentence, if you like. Perhaps it’s not all the fault of the tree. Perhaps it needs more nourishment, more watering, more air, more love, more understanding. And today this is the good news for Lent. Jesus’ God is patient, who understands us, who knows that sometimes we are just overwhelmed by life and are not able to produce the fruits that we could. Jesus, the Gardener is ready ‘to wait on our love’,- to use Rowan Williams’ lovely phrase, - who is giving us time to rediscover our fruit-bearing capabilities.

I want to finish by quoting a poem written by a Hungarian poet Erzsebet Turmezei. I am not sure if she wrote it as a response to this parable, but even if she didn’t it may be an encouragement and a kind of programme for Lent, which picks up the symbolism of the parable. What may happen during the ‘suspended sentence’? I am afraid it is only my own rough translation, but here it goes:

If I am not doing anything

I’m not hurrying

I don’t dash about

I’m not making plans

My will has run out

I’m not doing anything

Just letting myself be loved by God.

I let it all go

I’m ready to rest

As a small child

in quietness

And not doing anything

Just letting myself be loved by God.

Light all around

Stillness surround

Flowing into me

Making me new

Whilst not doing anything

Just letting myself be loved by God.

New fruits will grow

For others to grow

Ripening quietly

P’wer, victory

If not doing anything

Just letting myself be loved by God.

*Erna Stevenson*