

Sermon 20^h March 2022
'Repent or Perish'
Delivered by Rev'd Lorraine Lynch

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF MY HEART BE ACCEPTABLE TO YOU, O LORD, MY ROCK AND MY REDEEMER. AMEN!

REPENT OR PERISH!it's such a fierce life-threatening command!

It reminds me of Dr. Ian Paisley, the fiery Irish Rev'd and politician who was reported to have been preaching one Sunday on the End Times - and in particular on the 'Day of *Judgement*'. As he reached the climax of his address he said that...

"On the 'Day of Judgement' there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth." At which point an old woman put up her hand and said **"Dr. Paisley, I have no teeth"** Paisley replied **"Madam, teeth will be provided!"**

Do **we** serve a God like this – a God who gives ultimatums? Ultimatums that determine whether we are loved by God? Ultimatums that leave us scared about our destination? Ultimatums that determine whether our eternal life will be spent in Heaven or Hell? According to common Jewish belief, painful experiences were signs of God's judgement. But my God is a God of unconditional love, and I hope yours is too! A love that is filled with mercy and grace that transcends **our** limited notion of love which is typically conditional.

However, we can't avoid Jesus' repetitive message in our reading that calls us to repentance, with that inherent fear of perishing. Indeed, we **are** currently in the middle of Lent which is calling us to be emptied of ourselves just like Jesus was in the wilderness. Repentance though is hard, as I'm sure you have discovered. And it doesn't help to feel the initial sting of God's frustration and disappointment in us - as the Vineyard owner in our 'Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree, seems to elicit.'

In this parable, we can feel that God is thoroughly fed up with having no return on his investment, there's no fruit on his tree after 3years of planting, and God is telling the Gardener, Jesus, you might aswell cut it down and stop wasting your time. It's not growing.' But it's not as easy as saying, "Just go back to Bunnings and find another plant, is it?!" In our many life roles, we have been given people and tasks to nurture and develop....nonetheless, we can't deny that our efforts fail to deliver a return for our investment.

Think parenting...how many of us have said or thought....

'After all I have done for you!' after giving up our lives for our kids. Yes... you too.... parents over there, of our young Henry who's about to be baptized. You too will throw 'hands up in the air of despair' wondering when the 'fruit of respect' will appear!

And kids, your plea is something like, "When will I get the right grades after all this studying I'm forever doing?" When will the 'fruit of success' happen? Or, for you young adults, looking for love, "What do I have to do to secure a decent boyfriend or girlfriend after maintaining my morals and physique for so long? It's like a cattle market out there!!"

And what about our health? After all these long years of looking after our body, we develop cancer that refuses to stop its invasion. What is the point of a healthy lifestyle? And for the menopausal, why has my body gone deaf?! Why isn't it doing what it's supposed to do when I go on a diet? Why am I starting to look like my mother despite my radically different lifestyle and determination to not be like her?! What has happened to the 'fruit of health?'

And finally, because I could go on, what about our vocations...our marriages...our friendships? When will **we** feel appreciated, respected and noticed? Where is the 'fruit of validation' after the years of a strong work ethic, a lifetime of marital commitment or loyal friendship (These examples, by the way, have nothing to do with me...I promise!).

So, whilst God and **we** have a right to be disappointed with a non-existent return on our investments, should we give up? Does a God hallmarked by unconditional love really give up on us? Do we as parents really give up on our kids when they misbehave? Kids, should you burn your textbooks and have done with them?! And should we as workers leave our jobs and look for greener pastures? Leave our marriages or friendships for a better person? The grass may very well look greener...but...as we know...it still needs mowing! Moreover, if it's very green, it's probably made of astroturf!!

Einstein said, "God is mysterious but not malicious!" We don't know enough to affirm that God never sends us suffering, but we do know that when it comes our way, it will always be for our healing, never for our punishment!

So what are we to do, when we feel stuck in our relationships, our jobs, our education and our health? If we are not to give up, if we are not to cut people off, how do we breathe new life into what feels dead? What is it that God is asking us to repent of in those many dry wilderness places that will prevent us from perishing?

I think the answer is in the parable itself. When God says, "cut the unfruitful fig tree down because it's bearing no fruit, why waste the soil?" Jesus responds with not, ok, give me the axe and I will destroy it.... no, Jesus says...

"Wait, Sir, give it one more year so *I...I*, (Jesus **himself**), I can 'dig around it and put manure on it so it can grow!"

He's not saying, 'Sir, just wait another year, and it'll come good, the fig tree will grow, your people will bear the 'fruit of respect, validation, success or health if you give them a bit more time'

Rather, Jesus is saying, your fig tree will grow, your people will grow, your people will bear fruit, if you let me help them. And that's where we come in. It's **there, at that point**, when we are feeling helpless and hopeless, that we need to repent of our **own efforts** to bear fruit and let **God** in!

It's at this point in our wilderness wanderings – that point at which we just want to give up in despair - that it's good to be reminded of David's desert prayer from the Psalm reading today, which he wrote whilst on the run from Jerusalem, seeking refuge during his son Absalom's rebellion. Hiding from his enemies in the barren wilderness of Judah, he was intensely lonely. We know what that feels like right? We've all been there. How many have been displaced recently due to the Floods, and imagine the millions of displaced Ukrainian people! Both near and far, souls are parched. Lives are torn apart and upside down. And maybe you're feeling like that here today – a bit like David?

David was far from God, in the wilderness – away from his preferred sanctuary, his homeland, – instead he found himself in a place that was dry and in a space of weariness and fear – but David clung to God.....and God held him. How did David do that? How do we do that?

Well, he reflected on two things in that lonely space..... one, David reflected on what God had **done** in his life...., and two, David reflected upon, **who** God was. He trusted God. That is, in order to let God in during our misery, we have to pause and position ourselves differently. Pause and position ourselves – in the midst of our dry and lonely wanderings - and **gaze at God**, rather than glare at our own navel. That is, to let God in, we have to first stop running from our afflictions – our relational conflicts, our addictions, our lonlieness, our war worries and health fears – stop trying to fix them ourselves, and allow God to continue sustaining us by his grace and let God deliver us into the Promised Land he has for us.

And that also means we need to pay heed to our Isaiah reading when he reminds us that, **'God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts.'** That is, we need to repent of our own ways and our own methods of doing things, and let the power of the Holy Spirit fill us with the love, the grace and the mercy we need for our personal situation. And allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with the ability and capacity to fulfil God's will – serving others. God's love always prevails, where the world fails. But Repentance is often found at the end of our own rope, but fear not, because the end of our own rope, is exactly where we find God waiting.

I love that old story of Peter at the gates of Heaven. The world has ended, all the sheep have been separated from the goats, all the faithful have entered Heaven, and he's about to close the gates... but he sees Jesus waiting.... standing outside.

"What are you doing outside Master,' Peter confusingly enquires?

And Jesus replies....

"Waiting for Judas!"

And, he waits... he waits for both you... and me. He waits for us all, regardless! (Even Putin, dare I say! In fact I have to include such dictators because God has no favourites! And if I didn't include Putin, then God's grace and mercy would not be unconditional - THAT's how much God loves us!).

Jesus therefore, issues a call for repentance because he doesn't want catastrophe to overtake us! That's why it's included in the baptismal service we are about to enjoy. It's a call for new divine Life for baby Henry. Repentance, therefore – unlike Rev'd Ian Paisley's harsh, bitter doctrine - is essentially a lifeline of restoration; a lifeline that leads to the promised land of abundant life for both ourselves and for our neighbours. Because when we repent of our ways, we flourish rather than perish, and when we flourish it's so much easier to do God's will and serve others. We become empowered to provide a return on God's investment.

God is essentially a God of many chances and he can be found always waiting for us to repent so we don't continue perishing in our own mess and misery. God is in the business of re-authoring our lives so they flourish. We are precious to God. Never forget that! Isaiah tells us, ***"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name, you are mine."*** So, what may seem like an impossible situation for you right now – God is able and willing to turn it around.

So let's be like David in our Psalm reading, clinging to God in the wilderness... ***"calling out in the crisis...Oh God, you are my God, I seek you! In the shadow of your wings, you will hold me. Your love... is better than life itself."***

Let's take the risk together, and repent of our ways by opening up our vulnerable hearts to the goodness and love of our Father. Let's be a people who say no to ourselves and yes to our Saviour. Let's choose to let God in, because he will never let us go! Let's choose to let God in, and allow him to fertilize and water the soil of our hearts so it can grow healthy divine lives that bear much fruit for God's glory, for the good of others and for our own good.

Let us pray,

Loving God,

The God of many chances. Thank you for believing in us. Thank you for the opportunity to turn our biographies into testimonies. You are mysterious not malicious so in faith we pray for repentance, trusting that you want to bring us into a happier existence. An existence that is marked by dignity – an existence that surrenders to your ways as you nurture and develop us into becoming fully human – a people that love you, ourselves and each other. Thank you for waiting. Help us also, to wait for others as they too are pruned by your love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.