

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*  
**SUNDAY SERMON**

*Lent 2*

*Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 17th March 2019*

The Great Earthquake of Lisbon struck at 9:40am on 1st November 1755. Being All Saints Day, most of the population were at mass at the time. The quake lasted between 3 and 6 minutes and destroyed 85% of the city including virtually every church, burying the people within who were celebrating the festival – it being a particularly important one. The one area of the city which remained untouched was, ironically, the red light district - the area of streetwalkers and brothels. It seemed that God favoured the prostitutes rather than the worshippers.

Or did he?

Does God really take sides and punish people in this way for their sins?

Today, we might ask similar questions of society itself. The people who died in the atrocity in New Zealand on Friday: were they any more sinful; had they offended God in some way that was especially terrible? In today's Gospel reading, Jesus asks a similar question of those who were surrounding him. Did a particularly brutal death come to one group of people because they had been particularly sinful? Did a tower fall and kill eighteen people because they had uniquely offended God in some way?

All of these incidents saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason and they lead us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, nothing that caused their demise. And, although these events might allow Jesus an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe, he does not go that route. Jesus only implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come. Life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.

Jesus wants to talk about repentance. The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus says, twice, "unless you repent you will all perish" like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid! He refers to death in a spiritual sense; a destruction of one's soul. He emphasizes the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long and lost themselves.

Is Jesus exploiting tragedy to score theological points? It certainly looks as though he capitalizes on the memory of recent horrors to stress the suddenness of death and the unpredictability of life. He does not promise freedom from calamity, but urges his hearers against false self-assurances. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as he suggests in the parable of the fig tree.

It speaks of imminent judgment. A cultivated yet unproductive tree may continue to live even without bearing fruit, only because it has been granted additional time to do what it is supposed to do. Unless it begins to bear fruit the result will be its swift destruction. Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance. Just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit. The tone of the parable emphasizes that patience and mercy temporarily keep judgment at bay. The role of the gardener offers a crucial characterization of this patience and mercy. The tree has not been left to its own devices. Everything possible is being done to get it to act as it should. Correspondingly, God does not leave people to their own resources but encourages their repentance.

The parable's power comes through the suspense it generates. Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the axe? How will this season of second chances play itself out? How do the gardener's efforts make the tree's existence a state of grace and opportunity?

Repentance becomes less interesting when people mistake it to mean moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a "180-degree turnaround." Rather, here and many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, to a new way of seeing things, to being persuaded to adopt a different perspective.

In this passage the need for repentance is assumed (be honest: we all need it) and so it takes a back seat in emphasis to the urgency of Jesus' call. Tragedy and hardship have their ways of nudging people towards God, but these verses suggest that tragedy and hardship come so suddenly that they often mark the end, not the beginning, of our opportunities to live lives inclined toward God. Don't let the introspective and pensive nature of Lent divert attention from the suddenness with which our Lent might end.

Jesus' words about judgment and repentance are scary, yet they depict human life as a gift, albeit a fragile one. Vulnerable creatures that we are, we can presume little and do little to preserve ourselves. Too many Lenten observances assume that taking our humanity seriously requires morose expressions of piety. But the Christian outlook on repentance arcs toward joy. And it finds grace experienced within the awful precariousness and strange beauty of our fleeting existence.

It bears repeating that Jesus does not explain the causes of violence that nature and human beings regularly inflict upon unsuspecting people. He does not blame victims. He does not attempt to defend creation or the Creator when "why?" questions seem warranted. At least in this scene, he offers no theological speculation and inflicts no emotional abuse. He asks, with an urgency fueled by raw memories of blood and rubble on the ground: What about you? How will you live the life you get to live?