

Jesus doesn't give us any easy answers about the question of suffering, but he does point us to a new way of life. And perhaps this is the function of the story of the fig tree which follows. We have the owner of the garden, who wants to chop the fig tree down, because it hasn't borne fruit for three years, and the gardener who pleads for it to be given one last chance, with special attention, in the hope that it will finally come good.

Now, this can be read in all sorts of ways: parables produce as many questions as they answer. One line of interpretation would try to identify the owner with God, while the gardener is a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah, pleading on behalf of the people, or Abraham bargaining with God to spare the city for the sake of the righteous. Perhaps, even, the gardener is Jesus, God's last attempt to save his people, the son and heir himself as another parable has it.

But I think it's difficult to justify a reading which presents us with such a vindictive and unattractive picture of God. Better, perhaps to link it with what has gone before, and the question of who deserves to suffer. At one level, we could justify digging up the fruitless fig tree: it's not fulfilling its purpose. But just before we decide with the owner that it deserves to be condemned, along comes the gardener, pleading to give it another chance. Maybe the result of turning from our sins, as Jesus admonished us in the previous paragraph, is to make us side with the gardener: not to condemn people on the basis of what we think they deserve, but to offer them a new chance, a fresh start, mindful of our own position. We did not deserve God's favour, Jesus makes that clear, but through our repentance – coming to see God as he really is and ourselves as we really are – we have discovered new hope, new life, which we are then to share with others.

Perhaps that explains why the parable has no end: we don't know what happened to the fig tree, whether it produced a harvest the next season or not. The Christian life goes on, and we rarely get to see the results of our activity: the seeds we sow may bear fruit in someone's life in years to come, or flourish in a manner beyond our perception. What we must hope and trust is that God is active in ways we neither know, nor understand, nor deserve, but is bringing all things to perfection in himself, to whom be glory now and for eternity. **Amen.**

Now, one answer which religion sometimes gives is “they deserved it”. I remember at primary school being told by a teacher, in an unguarded moment, that she thought that AIDS was God’s punishment on modern immorality. There’s no doubt that our behaviour contributes to the disasters we suffer: promiscuity spreads diseases, cost-cutting leads to flaws and failures, speeding cars are more likely to be involved in fatal accidents. But although we can construct lengthy chains of causes, this rarely provides an satisfactory explanation. What it does sometimes identify is a scapegoat, someone who, according to a certain interpretation, can be seen as deserving punishment. But that doesn’t undo the original damage; two wrongs don’t make it right.

No, what Jesus said is explicitly that the victims didn’t deserve it. “Do you think because these Galilaeans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galilaeans? No, I tell you.” Jesus rejects the explanation that the objects of tragedy are the worthy recipients of God’s wrath, in some way which surpasses our human understanding, perhaps because of errors committed in a past life, as some religions have it. This is good news for our understanding of God, although it should make us pause when we’re next tempted to say “He deserved it”: just as our friends don’t deserve the evil which befalls them, neither do our enemies, however clear-cut the process of cause and effect may seem to us.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there – which is where it gets difficult. He says “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” The victims did not suffer because they deserved it – and by the same token, the fact that we did not suffer does not make us virtuous. None of us is innocent. We need to recognise our own sinfulness, and turn away from it in order to enter the life which Jesus promises. This doesn’t mean that we will be exempt from future tragedy: it continues to be part of human experience. But if we do turn to follow Jesus, even the rather blunt, confrontational Jesus who challenges us here, then perhaps we will no longer fear mortality, those who kill the body but cannot hurt the soul, as he says elsewhere. Our attitude to life will be transformed, viewed from the prospect of eternity. That’s not to diminish the catastrophe of disaster, or to do away with the terrible suffering of people apparently at random, but it is to believe in a God who has plumbed the depths of human despair, of death on a cross, and has risen again to proclaim a new life of forgiveness.

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 11/3/07 10.00am
Third Sunday of Lent
Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Cor 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

This morning's Gospel reading isn't one we encounter very often, and I suspect that as it was read out you were either thinking "I don't remember this bit" or, if you won a prize for scripture knowledge at some point, maybe you thought to yourself "It's a while since this came up." In one way, it's not surprising that we don't have it at the front of our minds: it's rather inconclusive (we never find out what happened to the fig tree) and it poses not a few problems of interpretation.

At the same time, it provides some evidence of the response Jesus made to questions people ask of religion today. We don't often get inquiries about fasting in the desert or walking on water, and even miraculous cures aren't as hot a topic as they once were. But "where is God in the middle of disaster?" is frequently on people's lips as we hear news of a tsunami, an earthquake, or any of the tragedies which appear as if from nowhere. So when Jesus is asked about a massacre in a religious shrine (with obvious parallels in modern Iraq or Kashmir), or those killed by the collapse of a building (like the market in Russia last year), his answers are something to which we should pay considerable attention. Furthermore, in sifting the different layers out in the construction of the Gospels, there's something in today's passage which gives it an authentic flavour: these are genuine questions about genuine events, so might Luke be passing on a tradition of the historical Jesus?

And what does Jesus say? Well, the first thing to notice is that he doesn't try to explain it as part of God's master plan. He doesn't have a pet theory about why bad things happen to good people, which can be wheeled out to cover all eventualities. His attitude seems to be – and I shall put this as delicately as I can in a pulpit – that "it happens". It happens. Suddenly disaster strikes out of the blue. Unsuspecting lives are tragically cut short. The impact could affect anyone, even us – and there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. How, we ask, could God allow it? It may sound a very modern question, since we don't tend to believe in impersonal fate in quite the same way as the ancients did. But, as the reading shows, it's been around a long time.