

1 Corinthians 10 : 1 - 17

Luke 13 : 1 - 9

Sermon

One aspect of the work of a minister is that we are frequently asked to conduct funeral Services. In the context of working in a Parish in Scotland this sadly becomes a regular activity, as the assumption is that we will conduct a Service for everyone who dies within the Parish area, unless they have connections to some other church. So on this particular day I was not doing anything unusual when I arrived at Mary's house and rang her door bell. I had never met Mary and knew nothing about her other than the information I had been given that her husband had died.

As she welcomed me in and we sat down it turned out to be sad story that she had to tell. Through her distress and her tears she told me how he had died suddenly and unexpectedly. She explained the deep sadness she felt that they would not be able to fulfil the many plans they had made for their later years. Yet underlying her obvious grief there was something else troubling her. *"I know why this has happened."* She told me. *"It's my fault. I've never lived a very good life, I never went to church. I always knew that someday God would punish me. And now he has."*

A can't remember how I replied to her. I guess it would have been some sort of explanation that the God I believe doesn't do that sort of thing. I'm sure I would have told her that he is a God of mercy and not of punishment. But no matter how theologically correct my words might have been that was not what she wanted to hear. Her world had just been thrown into chaos. Suddenly she didn't seem to have any control over anything. And the one way she could make some sense of it all, the one thing that created some kind of order and logic in her mind, was her belief that there was a reason for it; she had been bad and therefore God had done something bad to her.

I can't at all agree with her view of how and why things happen in the world, and I certainly would not agree with her understanding of God

but I can understand why she feels that way. After all, what she was expressing is a worldview that we often find reflected in the Old Testament. There, if a battle is lost the response is not to analyse where the strategy may have been wrong but to call for national repentance and try to appease the God who seemed to have turned against them. We find many references to God rewarding people for being good and punishing them for being bad.

This is the attitude we see in the conversation recorded in John's gospel where the disciples come across a man who was born blind and ask Jesus whose sin it was who caused this defect, was it his own or his parents? (John 9:1-15) That world view and that view of God was held by many of the people Jesus walked among. And in our passage today it seems that the two disasters which people are speaking about have again led to the popular assumption – those who suffered must have done something to deserve it.

This is the same attitude that was behind the guilt which became such an added burden on top of Mary's grief. And it is an assumption that still lives on today on many levels. When the terrible earthquake struck Haiti, the American TV evangelist Pat Robertson felt able to explain why it happened. His explanation had nothing to do with movement of tectonic plates, but was because the people of Haiti had made a pact with the devil hundred's of years ago. The same man also attributed the Hurricane Katrina to the number of abortions carried out in his country. The message is that if we do wrong then God will punish us, therefore if bad things happen it must be because people have been bad.

The thing is, however we might want to disagree with it there is something attractive about that theory. We may not like the idea of a God who is waiting to punish us, but perhaps that thought may be less scary than believing it is all just random and we have no control over it at all. If we can find a reason why tragedies happen, be they personal tragedies or global tragedies, then at least we have something to get a hold of, at least there might be something we can do to stop it happening again.

And even those of us who may have more experience of Christian faith than Mary, the guilt ridden widow, even those of us who might want to claim more spiritual depth than Pat Robertson, are not immune from this. Calamity strikes, things go wrong, and we instinctively hunt for some reason to explain what has happened. We search for someone to blame, we perhaps even blame God. Why is he punishing us like this?

Our passage from Luke this morning finds that very issue confronting Jesus, and his response is not entirely what we might expect or even hope for from him. He is faced with the popular assumption that those who suffered from the recent tragedies, the massacre at the Temple and the collapse of the tower, must have done something wrong and must in some way have deserved their fate. So asks them what seems to be a rhetorical question, "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*"

It may make us feel better to believe that. It tells us that God follows rules we can understand. It assures us that nothing so terrible will happen to us as long we don't misbehave. But to his question, Jesus says simply and clearly – no. The people who suffered in this way were no worse than anyone else. That is not how the world works and that is not how God operates. Mary's husband did not die because she did not go to church. The people of Haiti did not have buildings collapse upon them because of something their ancestors did. Jesus clearly and strongly and bluntly condemns that way of thinking. But... he continues, and this is the uncomfortable bit, "*but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*"

Now Jesus words had a very immediate application. He was calling people to a way of peace and compassion but people chose instead the way of conflict. And by the time Luke's gospel came to be written the power of Rome had stepped in to crush their uprising and had destroyed the city of Jerusalem with those who survived the terrible bloodshed being forced to flee for their lives. The people did not repent, they did not change their ways, and they did perish in the same way, at the end of Roman swords and under destroyed buildings.

Yet there is also a wider theme here. While Jesus directly refutes the idea of a God who lurks around looking for reasons to punish people and

dreaming up imaginative ways to do it, he is also saying that how we live has consequences. He is saying that we cannot expect to go on living in wrong ways and imagining it does not matter. He is saying that unless we turn away from selfishness and pride and greed and aggression, then we are heading for trouble.

This is not a direct cause and effect thing. It is not that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. You don't have to live long in the world to see that is not true, and Jesus own life will bear witness to a different truth, as he suffers and dies not for doing evil but for doing good. Nonetheless Jesus clearly says that if we keep going down the wrong road then we will not end up in the right place. And he clearly teaches that the role of God in our human lives is not punish but to do all that he can to allow us to change and to find the right way. That is the point of the curious little story about the fig tree.

Is God behind the bad things that happen in our world? Do those who suffer in this world simply get what they deserve? The message from Jesus is no – it's not like that. That's not how it works. God does not punish our faults but generously provides all that we need to recover from them and to do what we should be doing instead. But that does not absolve us of all responsibility. For we are still called to do all that we can to minimise suffering in the world, to look after ourselves and to look after one another. We are still called to be fruitful and to do what is right and good and just in the world.

Bad things may still happen to us. Painful times may still come our way. Jesus himself is a model of that. But if we want to be where God is in the world, then we have to focus on repenting of doing wrong and actively doing right. And we rejoice that he gives us every opportunity to do that. The rewards may be immediate and they may not be obvious. But they are sure and certain and eternal.