

Luke 13:1-9,31-35

This week turned out very grim. On Wednesday we looked at Judas betraying Jesus and thought of all the mistakes we make that affect lots of other people and cannot be undone or made better. We also listened to stories of the persecuted Church in Nigeria including the one about the girls who were kidnapped by the Islamist group Boko Haram. Three years on over 200 of them are still missing.

In today's Gospel reading people are reminded of two tragedies of their day – Pilate killing some Galileans and defiling them after death and the tower of Siloam that collapsed. Even though some blamed Pilate for its fall, it was a tragedy that happened, killing 18 people.

We can think of many more. Children and grandchildren dying, terrorist attacks, cancer, sex abuse, accidents of various kinds. We could go on and on. The world seems to be in such a state that all we can say at times is: Why? Why? We have no words. There are times when we do not feel cosily wrapped up in God's love at all but are lonely and desolate. We feel no hope and no joy.

In his sermon entitled 'Let God be God' the Rev Eric Christopher Shafer writes: 'It's hard to let God be God. We long to explain things only God can know. We human beings have spent centuries to find cause and effect patterns for every good and every evil. Yet we can each tell stories of terrible tragedies that have happened to good and faithful people. Maybe they happened to you. We want to make sense of things that make no sense so we put words into God's mouth that are our own rather than God's.'¹

He then recounts the following story: 'years ago, William Sloan Coffin preached a sermon about our temptation to speak God's mind. During the years when Rev. Coffin was senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, his son Alex was killed in a tragic car accident. Alex was driving in a terrible storm; he lost control of his car and careened into the waters of Boston Harbor. The following Sunday, Dr. Coffin preached about his son's death. He thanked all the people for their messages of condolence, for food brought to their home, for an arm around his shoulder when no words would do. But he also raged; he raged about well-meaning folks who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will. "I knew the anger would do me good," he said.

Then he went on:

"Do you think it was God's will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of 'frosties' too many? Do you think it was God's will that there are no street lights along that stretch of the road and no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

¹ <http://www.mtolivechurch.org/worship/sermons/547-let-god-be-god>.

We cannot explain why bad things happen to good people. Jesus doesn't attempt it and so neither will I. What Jesus does though is to tell a story of the fig tree. He seems to be pointing at it and saying: Such senseless loss of life should be a wake-up call to you. Maybe tragedies around us could work as a wake-up call. Maybe Lent is a wake-up call. Maybe we need to learn to place trust in God rather than in our own security and comfort.

Someone suggested that maybe Jesus is the frustrated owner of the vineyard in this parable. Frustrated because his disciples still don't get it, still ask stupid questions and the whole mission and ministry of a lifetime seems a failure. According to this understanding he's ready to chop the tree off – enough is enough! He spent so much time and energy toiling the soil but there are no results! Away with it!

In this scenario God would be the gardener who patiently says – give me a little more time and see whether my mission has failed. See whether I've achieved what I set out to achieve. Just a little more time and then, if there's still no fruit, we'll chop the tree down. It's a telling interpretation as we know that God's mission in Jesus hasn't failed – but was about to conquer evil forever.

Would this be one of the most human moments of Jesus? A moment of doubt, frustration and impatience? Did he have a need to see the results of his work and was angry and disappointed when he couldn't see them? Maybe he was a little afraid too. He calls Herod a fox while he compares himself to a hen gathering her chicks.

For years I've seen this image as a very fluffy and comfortable one of Jesus gathering us in. Very cosy and lovely. However I read the following explanation yesterday: 'For those of us who didn't grow up on or near a farm, the image of a mother hen gathering up her chicks doesn't mean much. But David Lyle Jefferey explains this image in a stark way:

His figure of a hen trying to gather her chicks under her wings to spare them from the ravages of fire will have special poignancy for anyone who has seen after a grassfire the burned carcass of a prairie chicken or pheasant that has sheltered and saved perhaps one or two, though seldom all, of her chicks.²

Now that is a powerful image and it actually fits in far better with the rest of the chapter than the fluffy chicks. Jesus wants us to live. Jesus wants to shield us. Jesus is ready to die to give us life. Jesus is frustrated that we're still not getting it and not sheltering with him. He was on his way to Jerusalem knowing he will die. He knows there isn't much time left.

In this time of Lent and preparation for Good Friday when Jesus does die for us this is a powerful reminder that the time is coming, that the decision needs to be taken, that we can't postpone coming to Christ and committing ourselves to him forever. One reason for it is that we do not know how much time we've got left as the first two tragic stories indicated.

² The Story of God, March 12, 2017, page 3.

So no, this week turned out rather grim. But maybe it will spur us into action. For Jesus' sake. Amen.