

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 20th March 2022
The Third Sunday of Lent

Collect

Eternal God,
give us insight
to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
 and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
 for he has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
 call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
 and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
 and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
 nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

Sermon

Last week I was speaking about direction. Which at this moment in time feels just a little ironic. For two reasons. The first is that last week's gospel reading was taken from the end of the thirteenth chapter of Luke, and now we have been transported back to the beginning of the chapter. It doesn't really help us to keep our bearings.

And the second is because of the phrase that Jesus repeats twice in this morning's reading. The phrase is this: "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." If you look up the word "repent", you are likely to find a definition along the following lines: "feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin." However, the word in Greek has a somewhat more specific meaning. It is the word *metanoia*. Which is really about a transformative change of heart. *Metanoia* embraces change and transformation – including a change of direction, if you discover that you're heading the wrong way. So much for the clear sense of direction that we might have been hoping for last week.

I'm hoping to convince you that all is not lost. That if you had just started to explore the Godward direction in your own life, today's reading can actually help, rather than driving a cart and horses through it.

First I'm going to help us all to get our bearings within the reading itself. This is the section of Luke's gospel when Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. And as we know from last week, he is heading there because it is God's will that he should do so. Even if he knows that it will be dangerous.

This morning's reading refers to two specific events, and it helps to know just a little about them to aid our understanding. The first event was the massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. It was Pilate who had called for the slaughter, as the pilgrims were offering sacrifices in the Temple. And the reading refers to the blood of the pilgrims being mingled with that of the sacrificial offerings. It's an event that is being talked about by the group surrounding Jesus, and given that he is a Galilean himself, there is probably a sense that he would feel a personal connection to the atrocity.

The second event is brought up by Jesus himself – the collapse of "the tower of Siloam" which may refer to a wall around Jerusalem. Whether the collapse happened during building works, or quite unexpectedly, it resulted in the deaths of eighteen people.

The initial point that Jesus appears to make when exploring these tragedies is to encourage his listeners to understand that those who perished did not deserve what happened. In straightforward terms, he makes it clear that bad things can happen to good people. It's something that we know to be true, however much we might wish it were otherwise.

However, Jesus's purpose as he speaks is deeper than that. And it comes back to that phrase that he repeats twice: "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by encouraging people to repent, so Jesus continues with the same message. Our lives are dependent on our willingness to be transformed by our relationship with God. He is speaking of that transformative change we find in the Greek word *metanoia*.

Last week we were asking the question about how we might know whether we are travelling in the right direction – the direction that God calls us to in our lives. Although focusing on transformative

change may not seem to help, bear with me, because I think perhaps it does. And that help comes in the form of the parable that Jesus tells of the fig tree. It seems that the vineyard owner is fed up with giving space to a fig tree that after three years continues to bear no fruit. It's a waste of space. Yet the gardener convinces him to give it another year, on the basis that he is prepared to invest even more effort in enabling the tree to bear fruit.

What Jesus appears to be saying is that a sign of our true repentance will be that we bear fruit. And likewise, it would seem that the sign that we are travelling in the right direction – the direction that God is calling us – is fruitfulness.

I wonder what it looks and feels like to bear fruit. The House Group I attend has been looking at the fruits of the spirit over the last several weeks: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Perhaps each of these is in its way a sign of fruitfulness. Yet, just as we have discovered in our studies, there is quite a lot of overlap, and at times each can feel a little hard to pin down.

Jesus's words in John 10:10 lie at the heart of our faith: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." If that is true, I wonder whether bearing fruit can feel like living abundantly. Perhaps an example will help.

In 2004, I was part of a small group of people who climbed the three peaks, each of the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales. It was an experience that I will never forget, as I came to realise that I could never have completed the challenge alone – and so I learnt a great deal about myself and our relationships with one another.

Among our group, some had attempted the challenge the previous year. This meant that they had experience of how best to go about it – specifically about the timings for climbing each peak. The challenge is to complete all three peaks within 24 hours, which means optimising daylight is important, as is trying to avoid traffic jams. We started climbing Ben Nevis, our first peak, quite late in the evening, which is something I simply wouldn't have considered without their experience.

We were also extremely fortunate that two people volunteered to be our drivers – and did not climb the peaks. Again, we could never have managed without them, because we were able to sleep and eat between climbs. They were also our encouragement and support throughout.

Of those of us who were climbing, I was probably the least fit. My training had consisted of one short holiday in the Wye Valley and a 25 minute daily walk to and from work. Given that some of the others were amateur athletes, it was agreed quite early on that I would set the pace on the uphills. Everyone else was my encouragement. Yet everything changed when we were on the downhills because it seems that athletes often have knee injuries, so I was the one providing the support and motivation while others were in some pain.

The reason I was transformed by the experience was that it did not take long for me to realise that I wasn't interested in personal success. If we didn't all make it up and down each of the three peaks, it simply wouldn't have been the same. I experienced the ways in which we can work together, drawing on each other's strengths, to enable a success that we could never have achieved alone. Surely that is what abundant life feels like. And I expect that you have many of your own examples.

So as we continue on our Lenten journey, perhaps part of helping to ensure that we are heading in the right direction, is asking ourselves what might need to change in order to ensure abundant life – for ourselves and for others.

Amen