

Sermon – 24th March 2019 – 9.30 am

I'd like you to imagine a scenario. You're a teacher, let's say in secondary school, and a student has not brought in their homework. How are you going to respond?

Now, I know you're all sensible people, and you're going to tell me straight away that I haven't given you enough information. Of course you will have your own feelings about the importance of homework, but that's only the start. There are so many factors that could potentially change your response.

How has the student approached you? Are they contrite – do they seem genuinely sorry? Or do they seem not to care? Is this a student who has forgotten their homework before, or is this just a one-off?

If we're going to be very honest, we'll probably also acknowledge that the kind of day we've had will also have an impact on our response. If we're tired and have dealt with a lot of difficult classes, this could feel like the last straw, but if we've had a positive, inspiring day, we may feel more forgiving.

Suffice it to say that if an eleven year old who had just started secondary school came up to us before the lesson in tears because they had forgotten their homework, they had always done it before, and they promised to bring it to us first thing the next morning we might be quite gentle and conciliatory.

Compare that with a child who was on their final warning. Perhaps close to being excluded from the school (presumably not only for not doing homework!) Who was about to take exams, which would be in jeopardy if they were excluded. We knew the child to have ability, but somehow they seemed to be squandering all their chances. Pushing the limits. Apparently not caring about the seriousness of the situation. Perhaps we would ramp up our response.

Whenever we hear readings from the scriptures, we need to remember that they were written in particular situations for particular reasons. Take our epistle reading this morning. This is a letter St. Paul wrote to a particular church at a particular time. Not only that, but in this morning's passage he appears to be replying to a letter that he has received raising specific questions and issues. None of this is to diminish the significance of what St. Paul says, but it is the background. It helps us to understand whether St. Paul was speaking to the person who had forgotten their homework just once and was very apologetic, or the one who is about to be expelled.

The Gospel reading is no different. Jesus is now on his way towards Jerusalem – there is a sense of urgency in what he is saying because he senses that he will not be around for much longer, and he has an apocalyptic sense that the end may be nigh for everyone.

The context takes nothing away from the significance of what we hear both in the gospel reading and the epistle, but hopefully help us to understand it better. Hopefully, too, the context helps us to recognise when we hear difficult words, harshly spoken at a time when we are feeling fragile and vulnerable, that perhaps we are the equivalent of the repentant school child who has just got the rough side of a frazzled teacher's tongue.

Nevertheless, none of this means that the words of today's readings should be ignored. So what does Jesus want us to hear?

The opening of this morning's gospel reading is relatively straightforward, replaying and refuting a longstanding understanding of suffering. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has made it clear that suffering is not brought on by God – remember in John's gospel when he encounters a blind man and is asked whether it was the man himself or his parents who sinned, and he makes it very clear that the blindness was not the result of sin. Even in the Old Testament, the whole book of Job is a reminder that bad things happen to good people – and it is absolutely not punishment. So far so helpful.

But there is a reason why Jesus is speaking with urgency, and it's because what he is trying to say matters, and it is also because his message does demand a response.

Jesus's life shows us what it looks like to live out a life of love. To live according to those commandments: to love the God; to love our neighbours – all of them; and to love ourselves. Each one of us is given the gift of life, as Jesus was, and the gift of God's unconditional and eternal love.

It sounds so easy. And yet what we see as Jesus's life unfolds are some of the consequences of pouring out love when people choose not to receive it. Of pouring out love when people love power, money, influence, status more than they love God, self and neighbour.

God's love *is* unconditional, and it *is* eternal. But imagine for a moment a marriage in which one person is constantly loving towards the other, pouring out love through their thoughts, words and actions, and the other simply does nothing. Doesn't respond. Isn't interested. It's the point being made with the fig tree. Water and fertiliser are being poured on, and yet it isn't responding.

The message of hope here is an important one – and it's a point made again and again throughout the gospels. That God really does keep on trying. Even here, in this most desperate of moments, still there is that desire to try for just one more year – and you like me may have that sense of a God who will probably still be trying for just one more year next year and the year after. This is, after all, the God who welcomed home the prodigal son and searched for the lost sheep.

And yet we are called to respond, because it is in the nature of love that it needs to be received as well as given. And when we receive love, it changes us. It just isn't possible to know – to really know – that we are loved in our beautiful uniqueness, and not to be changed by that knowledge. Especially when we know that our neighbours are equally loved.

The call to repentance that we hear so much during Lent is a call to reorient ourselves once more towards God. To remember once again that we are loved and cherished. To feel that compulsion to respond.

When we talk of love it can sound so easy, and the path of Jesus's life tells us that it is anything but easy. But it is life. In the end, the things of this world are really only skin deep – when it comes to power, money, popularity, they really are ephemeral. Whereas to know God's love is life itself.

Amen