

## Lent 3 ~ Holding on to Hope

Luke 13: 1-9

This past week the news has continued to document horrendous images and shocking film footage from Ukraine - of the devastation to lives and communities as a result of President Putin's actions. We find the situation truly awful, and also, unfathomable - how can it be possible that such events are taking place in Europe in 2022? It's all such a mess; the situation seems so hopeless and terrifying. Yet, in the midst of it all - mixed in with the pain, suffering, loss, heartache, devastation - there are beautiful, poignant glimpses and moments of solidarity, love and hope.

As I write these words on Wednesday, within just 48 hours since it began, over 130,000 people have registered on the UK government's, "*Homes for Ukraine*" scheme to host refugees. What an incredible, moving response, offering hospitality and hope to those who have lost so very, very much - offering hope; showing those who seek refuge in this country, that there are those who care, and who stand with them.

As I write these words on Wednesday, the breaking news story is that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is on a plane, on her way home to the UK from Iran, having been held here there since 2016! She was accused of plotting to overthrow Iran's government - which she has always denied. 6 long years held in Iran. In 2016 she had been visiting Iran, taking her young baby daughter Gabriella to see her parents and to celebrate the Iranian New Year, when she was detained.

She was initially subjected to intense interrogation and in placed in solitary confinement. Later she was sentenced to 5 years in prison, which was more recently extended. From within Iran, Nazanin did what she could to appeal; and here in UK, her husband, Richard, an accountant, tirelessly worked for her release; last autumn even completing a 21 day hunger strike demanding the government do more to secure his wife's release.

6 long years; separation across continents; not seeing her daughter grow - in the darkest, toughest months and years, it must surely have felt utterly hopeless; and yet, the family did not give up; they continued to hope. Today, Wednesday, as I write, finally, that hope and hard work has paid off as Nazanin flies home to her family in Hampstead.

Hope is such a powerful thing - that despite the sometimes impossible circumstances of our lives, we can, nevertheless, hold on to hope. For Christians, we hold onto the sure, certain, hope we have in God's love for us - his truly incredible love.

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When I read the Gospel reading set for today, I did sort of gulp! This is *not* an easy reading - it's tough. It's tough to understand; and when it's unpacked, it's tough to hear and respond to... *and* ... it's *also* full of *hope* - full of God's powerful, beautiful grace, mercy and compassion. This passage speaks of having sure and certain hope in God's love and grace, despite sometimes tragic situations.

We heard how a group of people came up to Jesus and told him of an incident when some Galileans had been killed by Roman soldiers while they were in the Temple offering their ritual sacrifices. St Luke doesn't actually explain *why* they told Jesus about this episode - he doesn't record them asking him any questions - but we might speculate that *perhaps* they wanted Jesus, being *also* from Galilee, to denounce the Roman authorities and so nail his colours to the mast as some kind of revolutionary. Jesus *does* respond to them, but he takes an *entirely* different tack. The question *he* seems to be answering is a very stark one - does *God* kill people?!

How many of you have asked yourself - or have been asked by others, maybe even in these past weeks given the situation in Ukraine - why does God allow suffering? One of the *big* questions and struggles for many, is how to respond to accidents, atrocities, and natural disasters. This is often a real stumbling point and pivotal issue for those exploring issues of faith. It's quite *common* to meet people who believe that such events are acts of punishment, by God.

Perhaps even *more* frequently, people ask why a loving God doesn't *prevent* such things from happening - as if God is a kind of puppet master who rules the world by pulling strings. And, of course, these are not just questions for those *exploring* faith, they *remain* questions for those of us who are Christians; causing us to continue to grapple with issues of faith.

When thousands are killed or made homeless as the result of some terrible natural disaster, an earthquake or a flood, are we to read it as an act of punishment for those people, or even for a whole country? Were those people somehow more deserving of death?

I'm sure we've *all* asked those big questions about *why* God allows horrendous natural disasters to occur... and, much more personally, asked God, "*why me?*" when we've faced our *own* hardships and suffering. We might ask, '*what have I done to deserve this?*'; '*Do you love me less than other people?*' - understandable, important questions.

In this encounter which St Luke records, Jesus *doesn't* give a *complete* answer to the question of *why* God allows suffering... *but*, what Jesus *does* make clear is that suffering is *not* about God punishing people. People *do not* suffer because God is judging them - because, for some reason, they *deserve* it - because, for some reason, God loves the victims less than other people.

And these truths are so important for us to hear, and to hold on to. When we, or our friends or family members are facing hardship and suffering, it's *not* a judgement from God; we're *not* being punished by God; we don't *deserve* it; and - so importantly - God does *not* love us any less than anyone else.

There are two different incidents referred to here. Firstly, those with Jesus mention a recent atrocity when a bunch of faithful Jews from Galilee had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and were offering sacrifices in the temple, when Pontius Pilate saw fit to send in his men and kill them. As the passage puts it, "*the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices*". It's not clear what actually happened - some suggest that Pilate feared a riot - but whatever the case, what we read of is Pilate slaughtering them in the temple.

It's clear that the Roman Governor of Judea, who we associate, of course, with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, was a very unpleasant and unpopular man. There's a Jewish historian called Josephus who wrote at the end of the 1st century AD. *He* outlines a *number* of Pilate's antics which upset the Jews he was governing. And here, we have a reference to another.

The second incident referred to in this passage, forms part of Jesus' response to the group. He reminds them of *another* horrible event, but this was rather different. This was apparently a pure - but terrible - accident, when a tower collapsed, killing 18 innocent people in Siloam, an area of Jerusalem.

Jesus asks those gathered around him, "do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this way?... do you think these Galileans were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" In other words - did the crowd think that in some way those who'd died in these two horrid events deserved it - were being judged?

Jesus' answer to these rhetorical questions is clear and unequivocal, "*No indeed!*" Jesus is crystal clear, the victims of disasters, accidents, violence and atrocities are *not* being punished; they are *not* worse sinners than anyone else.

However, Jesus doesn't stop there. While it's *not true* that the victims are being punished for their sins, Jesus *does* go on to state that what *is true* is that, "unless you repent, you will ALL die as they did."... We are *all* sinners... and so we *mustn't* draw the wrong conclusions about such incidents. Tragically such horrendous things *do* happen - and they could happen to any of us - but they *don't* mean we deserve them, or are being judged in some way.

Then, Jesus changes the focus *away* from specific horrible events, and instead turns his hearers' attentions to the fact that *all* of us are sinners, and we *all* need to repent - otherwise we will all die - spiritually. We must *repent*. The Greek word translated into the English, 'repent' is *metanoia*, and we have some words in English which have the same root, for example, metamorphosis. This means that we can that understand *repenting* - *metanoia* - isn't just about *regretting* things in the past, but about *transformation*; about changing our lives; about turning *away* from sin and turning *to* a different way of being.

Jesus wants the group around him - and us gathered here - not to get distracted from the *main* thing, which is that we *all* need to take a good look at ourselves, and, when necessary, confess and repent of our wrongs - turn our lives around. All of this is, of course, part of the discipline of Lent. And *that's* the link to the *next* part of the reading. It perhaps feels a bit abrupt - Jesus goes from speaking about the awful accident of the collapsing tower in Siloam, to the fact that *all* are sinners, to a parable about a fig tree that doesn't bear fruit. It might seem quite disjointed.

But the short parable of the fig-tree reminds us of God's love and grace and mercy. Jesus has just been challenging those around him of the urgency and need to repent. The implication is that we never know what's round the corner, so Jesus' message is urgent - repent: get things right with God *now*; don't delay; turn *to* God.

But then, Jesus tells this parable - a parable which *does* pick up the theme of judgement - but which allows grace. This fig tree in the vineyard - which apparently was *not* unusual, as fig trees were good for the vines - this fig tree had failed to bear any fruit for three years. The owner of the vineyard had given up on the tree, he effectively declares that it's a waste of space and of the nutrients of the soil, and tells his gardener to get rid of it. The owner of the vineyard thinks the plant's had plenty of time to bear fruit, and it's failed to do so, and it's time for it to go.

However, the gardener pleads clemency for the tree, requesting it be given *one more chance*; saying he'll try his best to help the tree; and if that last chance works, great, if not, *then* cut it down; then get rid of it. The tree is given a reprieve - the owner of the vineyard is persuaded to be merciful to the fig-tree; but *only* for one more year - *not* indefinitely..

I'm sure the point of the parable is clear. The fig-tree is a picture of us. Jesus has just been exhorting those around him to repent, to turn away from their wrongdoings, as they don't know the future and what time they may or may not have - so to get on with it and repent, not to put it off. And yet, there is also mercy in this account - there's one last chance for the fig-tree.

But, we cannot live indefinitely in ways that do not please God; we can't evade his judgement for ever. So the urgency is still there - don't put it off; repent and seek to live faithfully for God. This was the message for those gathered around Jesus at the time - and this is *still* the encouragement and challenge to us today. It's not an easy passage of the Bible, but we shouldn't avoid the tough passages or try and gloss over them or apologise for them.

As we continue our journey through Lent - this period of self-examination and getting things on track - then the challenge of Jesus' words here are very timely. We too should repent - turn away from the things that we do, say and think that are wrong - and live as faithfully as we are able before God, asking Jesus - the gardener - to nurture, feed and nourish us, so that we bear fruit for him.