

All who are thirsty

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 23rd March 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 55; Luke 13:1-9

Introduction: Two angles on repentance

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings both have a theme in common: the need for repentance. Our reading from Luke contains two separate sayings of Jesus, which are linked by the common theme of repentance. We start with Jesus' response to a report of a massacre by the troops of the Governor, Pontius Pilate. From Jesus' response it seems that the people who tell him about it are wondering whether the deaths of these people was a punishment from God. Jesus refutes this, and goes on to refer to another recent tragedy, where eighteen people were killed by a falling tower. Here again, Jesus comments that it would be wrong to see this as an act of God to punish the victims who died.

You will no doubt have heard people who've suffered a tragedy asking "why me?" Or questioning why something bad should have happened to another person who clearly didn't deserve it. From Jesus' words in this passage we should conclude that there is not necessarily any direct connection between suffering and sin. Of course, sometimes we *are* responsible for the things that happen to us. It should be no surprise if a heavy smoker gets lung cancer. But people who have never smoked can also get it.

But before we get complacent, Jesus also gives a stern warning, which he says twice: “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”¹

Jesus then goes on to tell a parable about an unfruitful fig tree. The owner of the vineyard wants it cut down, but his gardener persuades him to give it another chance.

“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.”²

The original readers of Luke’s gospel would have understood that this was a reference to the nation of Israel, and in particular Jerusalem and the ruling Jewish establishment of the day. It was as if Jesus was the gardener, giving the nation a last chance to repent and begin to bear the fruit that God expects of his people. Less than 40 years later, in 70 AD, judgement did fall on Jerusalem, as the city and its beautiful Temple were destroyed by the Roman army.

The prophecy of Isaiah which we heard earlier was given to the Jews centuries before Jesus, when they had suffered the destruction of Jerusalem under the Babylonian empire and the loss of their first Temple. This first disaster had happened because Israel had sinned in two major ways: abandoning the exclusive worship of the LORD and allowing injustice against vulnerable minority groups to become endemic – or to put it in a different way, failing to love God

¹ Luke 13:3,5

² Luke 13:8-9 NRSV

wholeheartedly and failing to love their neighbours as themselves.

A warning for us

We should learn from their example. We used to consider ourselves a Christian nation. We have a proud legacy of social reforms intended to protect the poor, prevent discrimination against vulnerable groups, provide education and opportunity for all, and ensure safety in the workplace. These have all sprung from a legacy of Christian values.

But reverence for God has been replaced by new ideologies, including the cult of the individual, moral permissiveness and identity politics. The good intention of protecting vulnerable groups has been corrupted by new dogmas and become a new form of oppression, policing what you are allowed to think and say. The enemy without has been replaced by the enemy within, with just as much potential to bring devastation to our society and lasting harm to the most vulnerable.

A fresh start

In Isaiah chapter 55 God offers his people a fresh start. This prophecy is most likely addressed to Jews who are in exile, some decades after the Babylonian invasion. They have lost confidence in their identity and their future as God's chosen people. Now God gives them an invitation to come to him and receive refreshment and nourishment free of charge. He offers them "an everlasting covenant", a relationship of love and faithfulness just like the covenant God made with King David centuries before. Just as David's prosperity and glory

was a witness to other nations of God's love and power, so God's people will again have influence over foreign nations.

God's offer of grace has been extended to all peoples now through Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus makes this invitation:

'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."'³

What do we need to do to accept this offer? The message of Isaiah is as applicable today:

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.⁴

God goes on to say that his ways and his thoughts are different from our ways and thoughts. In last week's sermon I referred to the challenge which faces us, to decide which side we're on – God's or the world's. The world's values and philosophy so easily invades our way of thinking, even as we claim to be Jesus' disciples. We need to study God's truth and his instructions for living and follow them. Repentance means change – a change of thinking which leads to changes in how we live and behave.

God's promise

³ John 7:37-38 NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 55:6-7 NRSV

Isaiah's message begins with God's invitation to come to him for refreshment and nourishment, continues with an invitation to change our way of thinking, and then moves into an invitation to trust God. Just as the rain and snow come down from heaven and water the earth, bringing fruitfulness and sustenance, so God's word accomplishes what God intends it to do. We can trust God's promises. If we turn to him in faith and accept the offer of a loving relationship with him, he will be faithful to us.

The chapter ends with a promise to the exiled Jews that they will go out of exile in joy and peace. A new era of prosperity and flourishing awaits them, if only they will respond to God's invitation, turning away from old, fruitless ways of thinking and living in a loving, covenant relationship with him.

An invitation to us today

Just as God offered his people a fresh start after their unfaithfulness and failure in the past, so he offers the same to us today – to us as individuals, to us as a church, and to this nation and all nations of the world. Making our own rules, following our own desires and creating our own philosophies only leads to chaos, disappointment and harm. The way to happiness, peace and justice for all comes from aligning our thinking to God's thinking, living in relationship with him and trusting his promises.

Which way will we go? The invitation stands. The choice is ours.