

**Second Sunday in Lent
St Paul's Manuka – 21 February, 2016**

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3: 17 – 4: 1

Luke 13: 1-9

Today's Gospel is a challenging piece. It really speaks to us about the coming judgment of God climaxing with a call to repent before disaster strikes. The fate of the Galileans referred to in the Gospel whose blood Pilate mingled with that of the sacrifices, like those who perished in the fall of the tower of Siloam, become a symbol here for the coming fate of all who will not repent and say they are sorry for their sins. The fig tree parable identifies Jesus' hearers as being in the last season of opportunity to change their ways. All this is pretty dire and we could be excused for reacting negatively to this bleak situation.

Sometimes judgment is brought about by our own stupid actions. We can sometimes be our own worst enemy. The story is told of a man who had continual ringing in his ears, bulging eyes and a flushed face. Over many years he went to doctor after doctor trying to solve his problem. One doctor took out his tonsils, one removed his appendix and another pulled out all his teeth. He even tried some goat-gland treatment that was very expensive in Switzerland. All these treatments were to no avail. Finally a doctor told him that there was no hope and he had only six months to live. The poor fellow resigned from his job, sold all his possessions and decided that he should live it up for his last six months. He went to a tailor and ordered several new suits and shirts. The tailor measured the man's neck and wrote down 16 and a half. The man corrected him and said: 'No, no my neck is 15 and a half'. The tailor measured again and confirmed that the neck size was 16 and a half but the man insisted that he had always worn shirts with a 15 and half neck. 'Well ok' said the tailor, 'but just don't come back here complaining that the shirts are causing continual ringing in your ears, bulging eyes and a flushed face'. Sometimes our hardness of heart is the cause of all our problems.

Often the disaster we cause ourselves is in the real events of life. Luke is using some sort of reference to historical events here where judgment was brought upon people – the death of the Galileans and the collapse of the tower – to reinforce his point. We really have no knowledge of these historical events from first century Palestine but there is no reason to doubt that they happened and that the listeners would know the reference.

We should be wary of making too much of these references and instead see them as a way of making the main point of the passage. Jesus uses these references here in Luke narrative as a way of saying that these people were no more guilty or sinful than any other people but he does make the point that in the kingdom of God all need to repent. What he does is move the focus away from judgment of others by making a call to put one's own house in order. Those who fail to do so will themselves perish.

Luke sees the judgment of God as falling on people in the flow of human history, after death, and on the final day of judgment. The wording here literally supports this idea of judgment falling on people but it is also closely aligned with this happening after death on the day of judgment. It seems that humans can bring this judgment upon themselves, with all the accompanying problems. Just think for a moment of the world at present. We live on a planet that has been polluted to such an extent that we are facing a climate catastrophe unless we change the way we live and reduce the green house gases. We live in a world where people choose to live with religious and racial prejudice and this leads to war and terrorism. We live in a world where a small group of the world's population controls most of its wealth and refuses to share it with others. The result is that many starve and so they rise up against this sort of inequity. We live in a world where some of us value our freedom and rights but are not prepared to make sure that all of the creation has the same freedom and rights. As a result many millions of people are forced to live in poverty, disease or flee for freedom as a refugee. We live in world where people are prepared to enforce their own narrow moral views on others and so they create hardship and pain for others while refusing to acknowledge their own problems. We live in a world where greed is common and where people refuse to share. All these scenarios lead to judgment on ourselves and others and all these scenarios cry out for repentance and turning again to the God who created us and who loves us. The problem comes when people refuse to repent and to change their ways. The point of this Gospel today is that at some stage this hard-heartedness will catch up with people and they will pay the price for their sin. Most of the world's problems can be attributed to some lack of repentance on the part of people.

There is also a parable here for us about a fig tree. In first century Palestine it was common for people to grow fig trees in vineyards. The one referred to here had been mature enough for the owner to have expected fruit from it for at least three years, and this tree had regularly disappointed the owner. The vineyard worker was ordered to cut it down

but he asks if the owner can wait just one more year giving the tree the opportunity to produce some fruit if it is given special nurture. This parable of the fig tree reinforces the earlier message of the need for repentance but also suggests that there is strict limit to the time available for the required repentance. The image is of judgment is graciously held back for a time but it will come.

So what is the Bible's view of this word 'repentance'. First of all we should note that the word repentance is infrequent in the Old Testament and in fact it is mostly used about God. God is seen to repent of God's actions – like making Saul the king for example. So in the Old Testament 'repent' can be used in the sense of 'change one's mind' or God changing God's mind. It also has the sense of 'turn' or 'return' where those who had rebelled or taken a certain course of action return to God or turn away from their previous actions. The Hebrew people frequently turned away but returned to God who accepted them in love following repentance.

In the New Testament however the word 'repentance' takes on a particular meaning. It talks of the sincerity of people's actions where there is a strong link between repentance and faith. There is a moral imperative where change must be sincere and come about in the person in order for them to be in the kingdom of God. John the Baptist spoke in this way calling people to repentance. In the New Testament it is the encounter with Christ that changes things where repentance becomes integral to a decision of faith and belief. Repentance comes to mean turning from sin and turning to God. It is much more than merely saying you are sorry and involves instead an acceptance of God's gift of faith. This is what conversion means – responding to God's initiative of the gift of faith. It is not just a change of mind but a complete reorienting of the self to God. This is not necessarily an instantaneous thing or a moment in time but a process of growing into God and of being converted into a state where we reflect and know God with us and ourselves in God. It applies as much to our relationship with God as it does to the way we live in the world.

Lent often speaks of repentance. Lent speaks of a turning – a turning away from sin and a turning to God where the person comes to know, usually in a gradual way, that God loves and cares for them and that because of this, life needs to change. As we continue our Lenten journey we come again and again to God, not perhaps in the sense of what is sometimes called 'the moment of being saved' but rather a gradual process of knowing God day by day and week by week to be the centre of who and what we are and how we live. It is as we come to know that

presence of God in our lives and we turn again and again to God that we repent and are converted little by little into the people God wants us to be.