



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Third Sunday of Lent 2022 Year C

1 Corinthians 10.1-13

Luke 13.1-9

Jesus lived in an occupied country; the Roman Empire was seemingly invincible as it stretched over the known world. Violence and brutality was always present, Jesus was a member of an oppressed people. The storm clouds had been gathering over Jesus for a long time. The religious leaders were against him, the Pharisees and Sadducees sought to trap him. We heard the warning to him, 'Herod wants to kill you,' but Jesus knows the place of his destiny is the holy city, Jerusalem; he is walking towards his death and his ultimate triumph over evil. Jesus is with a large crowd going up to Jerusalem and he is told about a recent event.

^{13.1} 'At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.'

We know historical information about Pontius Pilate, the governor, quite apart from what the New Testament tells us. The historian Josephus relates his behaviour on several occasions. Pilate was a brute and a bully determined to keep order at any cost but it seems he delighted in antagonising the Jews. He cared nothing for their beliefs and the example mentioned here refers to an unprovoked attack on a party of Galilean pilgrims who were slaughtered while worshipping in the Temple.

The question, 'Why' hovers in the air, but Jesus addresses it.

² 'He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?'

Was this atrocity the result of their sinful behaviour? Then Jesus mentions another incident,

⁴ '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?'

Siloam is a small area of central Jerusalem near to the Temple and people had been killed when a tower collapsed. Were these deaths a result of the extra sinfulness of those people?

³ 'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

And Jesus repeats these words just a few lines later. People will be killed by the sword, buildings will be destroyed and the inhabitants killed. The city and its Temple will be destroyed in unimaginable horror. Jesus is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus is the Saviour, he brings God's message and it is simple and it is a warning. Unless the people turn from the old ways and values, unless they refuse to follow nationalism, and warfare and strife, unless they turn to the kingdom values embodied in Jesus, destruction will follow, unimaginable suffering will follow.

When we look at the epistle reading we will see Paul's reference to the continual rebellion of the people in the wilderness and what happened as a result. Jesus is issuing a warning, they must turn to God's way, Jesus' way, that of love, peace, humility and kindness. It is basically, 'Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword.'

Jesus is advocating the way of goodness, of right living. He is the Messiah, the Saviour, the anointed one for whom they have been waiting. Jesus is God and man, now will the people recognise that and turn to him? So he illustrates what he has said with the parable of the fig tree. Anyone who is a gardener or who has an allotment as I do will understand this! It is very tempting to lose patience with a plant which you have planted and nurtured but which year after year yields nothing. The temptation is to dig it up, throw it in the bin and replace it with something which will fruit! If we apply this to the Jewish people the comparison is easy to see, throughout their history they have turned away again and again, they have rebelled against God and instead of following his way have followed their own. Worse still they have contrived to pretend they are worshipping God while still doing their own corrupt thing; Jesus' anger at his cleansing of the Temple is an example of that. God would be justified in losing patience as the owner of the vineyard in the story, but Jesus as the gardener mediates for them. Give them this one chance, I will minister to them, I will show them the true way, I will work so that they may follow me and bear good fruit. If not however, the results will be catastrophic and the time is very short.

The resulting destruction of Jerusalem brought horror on an unimaginable scale. The people could have turned to God's son, instead they hung him on a tree and turned away..

We have seen throughout history and are seeing today the consequences of people rejecting goodness and choosing evil. We are witnessing the catastrophic cruelty of unbridled evil power. But we are also seeing the love of God as people all over the world seek to help in practical ways by giving things at collecting points or by making donations or by serving people fleeing from their lands. We are seeing an outpouring of prayer for peace and love. We are witnessing the firm belief that goodness will overcome evil.

Jesus our God took on himself the worst humanity could do and overcame it. The kingdom values must be our way on earth and nothing can ever overcome goodness, nothing can separate people

from the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is with that firm belief that we pray for the people of Ukraine and for all who flee violence and terror.

Our epistle reading is from Corinthians. Paul is addressing the Christians in Corinth and we know the background of that city. These people come mostly from pagan backgrounds, are used to the behaviour and practices of that pagan world. Now, as baptised Christians they need to adopt the way of Jesus Christ. There is a great deal of symbolism in this passage but what Paul is doing to begin with is to try to make the Corinthian Christians understand their background. Jesus in our gospel reading is speaking to Jews and warning them of the disaster to come if they don't take the chance God has given to them in the Messiah. Goodness knows they have turned their back on God enough in the past. Here Paul is making the Corinthians understand that though they may not be Jews now, they have been baptised as Christians in the Jewish history. The story of the Jews' relationship with God is their story, their background because Jesus is the culmination of that history. His is the final covenant.

So then Paul speaks to these people, whom he has had difficulty with, to warn them not to backslide into the old pagan ways. To help them understand they are part now of this ongoing story. So he tells of the Exodus.

^{10.1} 'I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink.'

Firstly notice Paul refers to 'our ancestors' now one reading of this would mean my ancestors, but here Paul is including all Christians in the story of God's people. The symbolism that follows illustrates this. I remember an evening service we used to follow saying that God led his people by 'a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night' it was referring to those wilderness years and God's presence. This was the presence of God with the Israelites and he led them onwards. Think too of the 'cloud' on the Mount of the Transfiguration, the very presence of God.

The Israelites under Moses were led by God over the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians. So it is by water they escape death and sin. So then a Christian escapes death and sin by baptism into Christ. This is the water which is the symbol of our confessing Jesus as our Saviour and God.

During those years the people were fed with manna, the bread of heaven, the food which was God given and which saved them from death; it was the bread of life. Now by extension the bread which saves is the bread of the Eucharist.

'in the same night that he was betrayed Jesus took the bread and gave you thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying. 'Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.'

These are the words of the Eucharistic Prayer; this takes us to Jesus' commandment at the Last supper when he explained to his disciples that he would give his life for humanity, and that the broken bread and wine outpoured would be symbolic of that act. That by doing this in remembrance of him Christians would share in the union of Christ and in his saving death on Calvary.

⁴‘For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.’

In the wilderness when the people were thirsty Moses called on God,

⁵ ‘The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Exodus 17.

Paul is referring to the tradition that the rock actually came with the people. For the Christian it is the Holy Spirit who is with us, it is Jesus who gives the spiritual and life giving food of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is the water of baptism which makes us Christ’s people and washes away sin through him.

⁵ ‘Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.’

The story of God’s people in the wilderness was one of rebellion, even as Moses was speaking with God on Mount Sinai down below the people were creating the golden calf. Again and again they turned from God and chose to go their own way. The result was that many died.

⁵ ‘The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.’ Numbers 21

Again and again Paul is drawing the comparison of what backsliding and disobedience can lead to. Remember that for the Corinthians living in a pagan society that was always the temptation and danger. They have turned to Christ and to receive the Salvation Christ won for them, they have responsibilities now; they must be true to him.

¹² ‘So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.’

Throughout our lives we face trials and temptations. Baptism and taking Holy Communion do not mean we are exempt. We are human beings and fallible, our actions must be truly Christian. We must turn our back on everything that is not Christ centred. Lent underlines the fact that we are sinful and that we need to fight against temptation just as Jesus did in the wilderness. His humanity suffered an onslaught from evil but he triumphed by the power of goodness, Evil would attack in full strength at Calvary and once more he would triumph and by that triumph win salvation for us.

We may not think the small temptations that come our way are important but evil is insidious and it grows. People having it their way, wanting power over others, turning their backs on goodness to do their own thing has led to most of the disasters we see on the news. It is this evil that is stalking the world’s stage now. But we fight through prayer and the power of love as Jesus did. The victory of goodness is therefore certain.

Jesus will face death and destruction but the Son will rise in glory on Easter Sunday. Jesus has won the promises of God for us. He saves us and we will be with him when he comes to rule God's restored and perfected order.

'Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.' Isaiah 43.1

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