

Sermon online on Sunday 20 March 2022

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Ephesians 5.1-2, 8-14 & Luke 13.1-9

Hearing the Gospel today is a bit like overhearing somebody else's conversation and not knowing the context.

Nobody is quite sure what the incidents were which Jesus is told about at the start. It seems that some Jewish pilgrims had been killed by Pilate's forces in the Temple as they were offering their sacrifices, which just reminds us that Pontius Pilate was a nasty piece of work. The second incident was the collapse of a building in central Jerusalem, whether because of jerry building or dilapidation or an earthquake we do not know.

The question hanging in the air was: had they sinned and was this their punishment?

Just as in John 9, a man born blind is brought to Jesus and they ask: Who sinned, this man? (an absurd question, you may think, given that he was born blind.) Or his parents? (which today would be seen as equally odd, but remember Exodus 20, where the second Commandment recites that God punishes the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generation).

Jesus' answer then was – neither. And he gives the same answer in our Gospel. No, neither the pilgrims nor the victims at Siloam were any worse sinners than everybody else in Jerusalem. But, and a big but, unless you repent, you will come to an end like theirs.



And Jesus then tells the parable of the fig tree, in much the same vein. The parable is about a desperate attempt to get the fig tree to bear fruit. This points to Jesus' last desperate attempt to get people to hear. Jesus had been preaching and teaching and healing

for three years but there was not much sign that people generally, and the religious leaders in particular, were paying much attention.

The vinedresser begs the owner to let him apply extra care and fertiliser hoping for fruit next season. And, if not, that is the end of the fig tree. And some see that parable as foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem.

(Horticultural note: If you have a fig tree in this country, do not apply manure. Our soils are already too rich for figs – they will just put on leaves. But on the rocky soils of Palestine, they need feeding.)

Sin does have consequences, for the sinner and for others, but those who suffer violence or disaster are victims not agents. People living in Grenfell Tower may have had failings but that does not lessen the responsibility of the builders and managers. Ukraine may have made mistakes but that is insignificant compared with the sheer brutality of the Russian war machine. Women may be unwise to be intoxicated or in unsafe places but nothing excuses violence against them.

Those who follow the advice in the letter to the Ephesians will not be guaranteed a safe passage or an easy life but the more people and societies who do embrace that way, the less we will read sad and alarming headlines.

We must pray for those who suffer from the faults and aggression of others and we should pray that God will change the hearts of those who carelessly or deliberately cause suffering.