

Year C Lent 3 God's Crucial Conversation Luke 13 1-9

Today, Jesus tears down popular thinking about God and about how God works in the world and directs his listeners to what really matters. In two seemingly distinct pieces, Jesus gives us a life-changing message so let's explore.

The eager crowd is gathered around Jesus, listening to all of his teachings. Right before today's story, Jesus has been telling them parables that warn against loving material things, counting on stuff rather than on God. And he is telling them to be ready, be watchful – the Son of Man, he says, will come unexpectedly. This means, of course, that the time of judgement will come unexpectedly. The time is coming but, he says to the crowds, you don't know how to recognize this.

He tells them they must be able to judge for themselves what is right rather than base their judgement on the world's ways of thinking. If they choose to follow the world's way of deciding what is right they could get tangled up in that choice.

This warning is worth hearing: "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" Jesus asks them. "Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny." If you choose the world, it will be difficult to untangle yourself.

Right on the heels of this warning to not follow the world's way of thinking about justice, the crowd demonstrates that they have, indeed, bought into the world's way of thinking about justice – hook, line, and sinker. They remind Jesus of the Galileans whom Pilate had murdered when they came to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple. Jesus in turn reminds them of the eighteen people crushed to

death when a brick tower fell on them. The implication is clear. The people believe both tragedies demonstrate God's justice in action. Those people who died must have been horrible sinners. The people who survived, on the other hand, are enjoying God's favour. Jesus tells them – and us – in no uncertain terms...That is not the way God operates. God did not kill the Galileans. Pilate did. God did not crush the eighteen residents of Jerusalem. The tower did. God did not create COVID-19, an evolving virus did. We must be wary, too, of the opposite thinking – if we survive a close brush with death, if we do not get COVID as others do, if we have a cushy life and so on, we must not presume that God is blessing us. To be blessed by God is to be called to be partakers in the fulfillment of God's purpose as Mary was...Mary who was shunned as an adulterer...Mary who watched as her son was brutally murdered... "all generations will call me blessed," she sings in joy because she knew she had a part in bringing all things closer to the intended perfection.

A crucial fact to know about scripture is that it tells us the story of God's salvation and how the people responded to God...both the good *and* the bad responses and scripture leaves it up to us to figure out which type of response we're reading.

When the Hebrew people were getting to know their God, they did believe that God struck people down when they didn't get things exactly right in their worship or when they got God angry. They placed their human way of thinking – a way of thinking they had placed on all of their multiple false gods they worshipped – onto this God. Isaiah tells us to be careful about doing this... "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is.55:8-9). Reading Scripture can be tricky business. We

often place our ways and our thoughts over top of what we are reading. One of my favourite quotations about Scripture comes from, probably, the very first Anglican theologian, Richard Hooker. He writes, “It is no more disgrace for scripture to have left a number of things free to be ordered at the discretion of the Church, than for nature to have left it unto the wit of man to devise his own attire” (*Anglicanism*, p.11). We do not check our brains in the cloakroom before we head out onto the dance floor with Scripture. Hooker argued that we should not unthinkingly take Scripture as an unambiguous, across all time, source for solutions to all problems in our lives (*Anglicanism*, p.115).

Jesus challenges the people, and us, head on today in our thinking about how God operates in our lives and in the world: When bad things happen, it’s God at work and, when good things happen, it’s God at work. Not so, Jesus says. We do not worship a God who punishes sinners with tragedies. We’d all be long dead. God does not deal with us according to our sins, Psalm 103 (10) assures us.

What God did was walk among us so that we would better understand him and his purpose for the world. What God did was open the door for us to be in relationship with him while we are yet still sinners. But Jesus does warn of a coming judgement quite often throughout the gospels. And notice that the concept used throughout is judgment – not punishment. We sinners will be judged. This is why, instead of getting into a lengthy discussion about God’s justice, Jesus brings his listeners back, time and again, to what they must *do*.

Repent, he urgently instructs us – twice. And repent is an action. To repent is not to think or say that you are sorry. Repent means change, turn your life around. Don’t worry about judging what’s happening to others around us, Jesus says. “The

need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors” (Matt Skinner, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Repent or you will perish like the ones Pilate murdered. Repent or you will perish like the ones crushed by the tower. This is not Jesus saying God had a hand in those deaths. Jesus is simply pointing out that not choosing God’s ways leads to death. Our consequence for choosing the world over God is not having eternal life with God...a life of perfect love, perfect joy in God’s perfect kingdom.

Thankfully, Jesus’ message about God does not end here – we would likely all be left quite concerned about whether or not we will have eternal life with God. But Jesus goes on to tell us the story of the unproductive fruit tree.

Trees that do not produce fruit comes up repeatedly. John the Baptist first introduced us to this idea when he was calling on Israel to repent by the Jordan River. He told us that the axe was at the root of the tree, waiting to chop. That’s certainly applying a bit of pressure on us, isn’t it? The first half of today’s Gospel is a caution that we must not reassure ourselves too quickly. Just because we have not been chopped down, does not mean that we *are* producing fruit.

But Jesus’ story of the fig tree lets us know that God is patient. The owner of the fig tree is frustrated with the complete lack of fruit and wants the gardener to chop it down, remove it. The gardener, though, convinces him to try a different strategy...nourish the tree with fertilizer and care and give the tree more time to produce fruit before giving up on it. The delay opens up the possibility of fruitfulness. Jesus assures us of God’s judgement in the first half of the Gospel. In the second half, he tells us of God’s delay in order to be able to show us mercy.

“God’s mercy is still talking to God’s judgement, and on that conversation hangs our salvation” (p.153 of Preaching Through the Christian Year C).

We, just like those hearing the words straight from the mouth of the Messiah, are in that time of waiting, being nourished – providing us the opportunity to produce good fruits, the fruits of repentance.

Repentance is a continuous practice for us because living into our baptisms is a continuous practice for us – one that is not finished until, like Jesus, we fully enter God’s kingdom. What happens in baptism embraces a lot of aspects of our faith but one important thing we do in baptism is to promise to God to follow only his ways. We pledge our allegiance and our love and we are given God’s allegiance and love. We promise that we will “persevere in resisting evil and, whenever [we] fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord” (BAS, p.159). Not *if* we fall into sin...*when* we fall into sin. Repentance is a daily thing and Lent is the time in which we are pointedly reminded of this. To get a better understanding of what it truly means to repent, there is a confusing bit of Scripture that will help us.

The prophet Joel writes of the coming day of judgment and says that, even then, we have the opportunity to return to the Lord “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of sin” (Joel 2:13). God repents of sin. How is that even possible? God does not sin and God cannot turn to God’s ways, he is God. Most translations get around this troublesome wording by saying, “God relents of punishment” which is what it means yet it does not tell us the whole story. Here, the word repent carries the meaning of being compassionate, of having pity. God is a God of compassion, giving chance after chance during this time of waiting, waiting to see if we are a waste of good

soil or if we will bear fruit. Bearing the fruits of repentance therefore means a turning to God and to God's ways and, the crucial bit, always having compassion.

We are told by Jesus repeatedly that we are to be as God is...gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, withholding judgement, and compassionate. Paul writes that, through baptism, this is made possible – we can transform into Christ's likeness. We, the fig trees are being given that opportunity even now. God nourishes us with the very things we promised to do in our first baptismal promise: to continue in scripture study, fellowship, worship – especially Holy Eucharist – and prayer.

“If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.” Let us wisely use this time we've been given and through Lent, strengthen our relationship with God and each other, renewing or taking on those things that nourish these relationships. God's mercy is still talking with God's judgment, and on that conversation hangs our salvation.