

Lent 3

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 24 March 2019

Readings: Isaiah 55 vv 1-9 and Luke 13 vv 1-9

The passage from St Luke's gospel which we have heard today causes many to ask some of the most common and complicated questions of human beings everywhere. They are questions that virtually everyone who has experienced suffering or loss has considered: 'Where is God in this?'

The related questions follow: 'Why is there so much suffering in the world?', 'Is suffering caused by behaviour?' and, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'

And this leads to their blunt questions: 'Does God cause suffering?' and 'Is suffering a form of God's punishment?'

In his short but profound book, *The Problem of Pain*, C S Lewis considers these questions and has this to say: 'The existence of suffering in a world created by a good and almighty God ... is a fundamental theological dilemma and perhaps the most serious objection to the Christian religion.'

The context of the gospel passage is this: Jesus hears that Pilate has made a religious sacrifice to the Roman emperor, who was often considered a kind of god in those days. As a part of that sacrifice, he killed some Galilean Jews and placed their remains on the sacrificial pyre.

And as if that is not horrifying enough, at the same time that Jesus hears of Pilate's treachery, news arrives that a tower in Siloam has fallen, crushing eighteen people.

The crowd who relayed this horrible news to Jesus was burning with the same question that has echoed across the centuries: 'Why did this tragedy happen to these people?'

We find this question elsewhere in Scripture. In St John's gospel, the question is asked of Jesus in a different way, about a man born blind: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?'

In other passages, well-intentioned but inadequate answers to the problem of suffering are suggested. Take, for example, the Book of Job, as Job's so-called friends gather in the wake of Job's terrible string of suffering and say well-meaning things like, 'You need to seek God,' or 'It could be worse,' or 'God's punishment is less than you deserve.'

We want to prove that there is a reason for every demonstrable effect. We want to explain whatever happens, whether the floods caused by the cyclone in Mozambique or the killing of the Muslim people worshipping in the mosques in Christchurch in New Zealand.

As the crowd asks Jesus the question of who or what is to blame for the tragedies that form the background to the gospel reading, Jesus cannot be clearer. Those who died were no better or worse than we are. Rather, Jesus says, we have all made mistakes and lost sight of God's will for our lives, and we are all sinners.

What's more, although Jesus insists that God does not cause us to suffer because of our sin, Jesus also reminds us that sin itself can cause us to suffer. Actions have consequences. There is no question that Pilate's murderous deeds, as well as the horrific actions perpetrated by today's tyrants, are sinful. And sin has consequences.

Destructive behaviour, violence, the lust for power, and the quest for vengeance and retribution lead to much suffering in the world. The Church is called to speak out in opposition to these forms of suffering, and to do all in its power to combat them.

It is interesting that Jesus follows this discussion with the parable of the fig tree. This parable reminds us that God does not operate on our conventional conceptions of fairness. Rather, in God's nature we see patience, faithful tending, and hopeful expectation.

For generations, human beings have railed against God because of what we perceive as God's inactivity in the face of human suffering. Why does God not solve all our problems? But in this passage, Jesus tells us that we are asking the wrong questions. We are not puppets. In a world where there are so many problems where the effects of human sin and greed and folly are all too apparent, Jesus offers a word of good hope: God is still tending the garden.

God is still working in and through God's people to bring light and life, love and peace to a broken and sinful world. We are called and invited to respond and join in.

And in that, there is indeed hope for us all.