

Luke’s gospel paints a compelling picture:

“Jesus, did you hear about those Galileans that Pilate killed? Or those folks wiped out when the tower fell down? It's been quite a week for God’s vengeance, eh?”

Bad things - happening in the here and now - and desperate to know the reason why, they bring their questions to Jesus.

Jesus has already ‘lectured them about ‘reading the signs.’ (He is astonished that they don’t seem to understand the workings of the divine plan - but that’s a problem for another day) The wrinkle for us to process this morning is how Jesus tries to convince his audience that bad things happen. The repentance that Jesus asks of us is not some sort of ‘hiding in pseudo-perfection,’ here repentance seems to be about a change of perspective.

Bad. Things. Happen. And, to paraphrase Jesus, ‘do you imagine that because bad things happen, the victims must be worse sinners than all the rest?’

The answer, of course, is a resounding no. Accidents happen. Disasters befall. Maniacs go on power trips - politics over-rule good judgement - bullets and bombs and accusations fly with impunity. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Everyone gets wet. No one is exempt when the κοπρία (*kopria* - ancient Greek for the smelly stuff often found in the barnyard) hits the fan.

That is not comforting news. There seems to be no gospel in this gospel...and then Jesus offers a parable.

What does this have to do with repentance, you might ask?

Good question - let me offer a suggestion.

The barren fig tree only has so much control over its own fate. All being equal, it will thrive and produce fruit and do the things a fig tree does. When the weather patter is disrupted or the gardener takes a holiday, or the landlord develops a taste for grapes - there isn’t much the tree can do about that. The fate of the tree can be affected by events beyond its control.

The work the gardener proposes - a little TLC - some good manure - this may or may not make a difference, the tree still has to be a tree; but one should never underestimate the effect of small mercies in the face of big mischief.

We are too often too eager to ensure that what we perceive as ‘crime’ is met with what we imagine might be ‘punishment.’ Such is the human comprehension of justice.

Bad. Things. Happen. Marital problems and family discord; health concerns and treatments that seem worse than the disease; difference of opinion that leads to fractured friendship; political ambitions promote violent reactions. War - war happens, in spite of our imagining that we’ve learned all history has to teach us about our irresponsible behaviour towards one another. And when Bad things happen, we demand answers - we crave ‘justice’ - we desperately pray that God would bring balance back to our little corner of the universe, because ‘we’re faithful’ or ‘we prayed’ or ‘they should be punished...’

I don’t know what ‘balance in the universe’ looks like, and I’m not arrogant enough to tell God what balance might look like. I am faithful enough (I think) to imagine that God might have a better sense of what is happening in the hearts and minds of other humans than I do.

Are there some trees in this garden of humanity that I think should be ‘chopped down’ because they are ‘wasting the soil?’ Yes. Yes I do.

Am I ready to take that action on myself, and campaign for some sort of vengeance on behalf of my idea of what constitutes ‘useful or fruitful?’ No.

Because of this parable - because - ***in spite*** of the complete and utter load of ***kopria*** that is evident on a daily basis in the news and in the world - I still try to follow Jesus. And Jesus, pointing to God, says ‘one more year - a little more care - let the manure (*did Jesus really just equate God’s mercy and justice with manure? That’s a question for another day too...*) work it’s magic.’

Bad. Things. Happen. Crimes go unpunished. Our mutual penchant for acts of destructive stupidity is, well, destructive and stupid. But it hasn't yet cut us off from the grace of God. Jesus says so, and I'm inclined to trust Jesus on this.

As things unfold - in the world and in our own lives - it is important to never lose sight of this; that while it's not true that 'God never gives us more than we can handle,' it is absolutely certain that God walks with us in this untidy mess we call life in the here and now, and that Jesus models a pattern of behaviour that brings us closer to something that is truly good for all, not just some.

The Kingdom of God is like that; good for all, not just some. And all our desire for swift justice, or perfect punishment only serves to distance us from the truth that Jesus points to and God longs for.

May the justice and mercy of God's good intentions work quickly on us, and on all God's suffering people. Amen.