



Third Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 20 March 2022

READINGS

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Sin and repentance

This Sunday's Gospel is difficult to exegete and expound on. On the surface it seems Jesus is trying to emphasise firstly, that all people are equally sinful and, secondly, the need for repentance – seemingly an appropriate message for Lent. It is helpful, though not always possible, to get to the historical meaning of a text. It so happens that the events which Jesus refers to, the mingling of the blood of Galileans in animal sacrifice as well as the collapse of the tower of Siloam, have no extant references outside of Luke, which means it is difficult, if not impossible to ascertain historical information as to the circumstances surrounding these events.

Both groups of people, the Galileans killed by Pilate and those killed by the falling tower, are referred to pejoratively. Seemingly, public opinion held these people to be sinful or, more sinful than the average Jew. Indeed, this is precisely the stereotype which Jesus is trying to counter. We could then ask the question as to why these groups were viewed with disdain, apart from the fate they endured. Indeed, within the thinking of ancient Judaism one's fate or circumstances were often directly connected to one's state or status of religious sanctity. Bad fate and circumstance were regarded as a result, and consequence, of one's sinful existence. Hence, for both these groups, and for whatever reason, they would have been regarded as being sinful prior to the grizzly ends they met.

It is not difficult to see why the Galileans would have been seen in such a light. Any one north of Judea, i.e. those residing in the provinces of Samaria and Galilee, were regarded by those in the southern province of Judea, which housed the capital and the temple, as being ethnically, and therefore also religiously, impure. In all likelihood, as this is something Josephus refers to as being common at the time in Galilee, the Galileans killed by Pilate were part of a seditious uprising against the Roman power complex and that Pilate had these people killed, and their blood publicly mixed with that of animals in Pagan Roman sacrifice, so as to dissuade any (Galilean) Jews from partaking in any kind of further sedition. It is possible at least that those killed by the collapsing tower of Siloam were labourers who were working on the tower's construction or renovation before it collapsed. If this is so, this group people would have been held in equal disdain because of their very low social status as labourers. Poverty too was a sign of sinfulness.

If we then try consider the next episode in the Gospel reading, the parable of the barren fig tree, this again, on the surface seems to be about the need for repentance – the motif of bearing fruit appears obvious; those who do not bear fruit will be judged, i.e. cut down. So what do we know about the historical context? Firstly, we know that in first century Judea only the wealthy ever had the means of

owning an entire vineyard. The peasantry, which constituted about 90 per cent of the population, were small-scale subsistence farmers who would have primarily farmed grains to feed themselves and their families. The gardener or vinedresser is in the employment of the vineyard owner, i.e. he is a labourer, albeit a more specialised sort. We must infer similarities of circumstance between this parable and the parable of the “wicked” tenants (Matt.21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). In other words, and again this is consistent with what we know of historical practice, though the vineyard owner owned the land and the vineyard, and benefited from its produce and profits, he did not work the land, but employed others to do so.

It is furthermore not entirely clear as to why the fig tree is in the vineyard. One theory is that, because figs were particularly hardy plants, they were planted to test soil when planting new vineyards so as to check the suitability of the soil for growing vines. Unlike other fruits, figs were known for their frequent fruiting – fruiting as much as up to three times a year. It seems however, that amongst certain species, male fig trees did not fruit and a process of caprification was necessary, whereby the branch of a male fig would be attached onto or near a female fig in order for the female fig tree to be pollinated. So it seems curious then that in its apparent third year this fig tree has still failed to bear fruit.

In preparing this homily I was reminded of an incident which occurred in Scottburgh during the lockdown. We had, on the property of the church, a rather large mango tree. However, and this is perhaps due to the type or species of mango tree, the mangoes produced were always much smaller than conventional mangoes and usually green in colour. And I had been told by members of the parish that these mangoes were typically consumed by dipping them in salt and curry powder. From what I gather I think these mangoes were sour or tart so that the combination of tartness, saltiness and spiciness made them pleasant to eat.

This practice was not familiar to me though and I confess, to this day, I have not eaten green mangoes with curry powder. But the reason I’m relating this story is because during the lockdown – and it may be helpful to know that petty theft skyrocketed, in the course of the hard lockdown (we had at least two break-ins) – a relatively young fellow who was known to the Scottburgh townfolk came to the church asking if he could pick the green mangoes from the tree. He asked to pick them not necessarily because he wanted to eat them with salt and curry powder but because he knew he could potentially sell them to others who would.

The first time he came I could see no harm in letting him take what he could from the tree. I wasn’t going to consume the mangoes and nor was anyone else from the parish. I subsequently realised the problem that might result though as he was back a few days later asking to pick more, and there were other folk living rough who also came seeking green mangoes from the tree. The point however is that, though the church was not a farm, and I was obviously no farmer, being on church ground the tree, or its produce technically belonged to the church.

So we return to the question of the fig tree – how did a solitary fig tree come to be in the vineyard and how did it come to be barren, if indeed it was? It was not, like the wine or grapes being grown commercially. It is inferred that it was meant for the vineyard owner’s personal benefit and enjoyment, or possibly for the personal benefit of the one actually working the vineyard, the vinedresser.

This Lent may the fruit we produce not only please the Owner of the Vineyard, but our fellow vinedressers as well. Amen