

I've no idea what the compilers of the Lectionary were smoking when they put together the current set of readings. Last week we were in Luke 13:31-35, but this week we jump back to the beginning of the chapter!

[Luke 13:1-9](#)

Whatever their reasons, though, I hope to show you by the end of this reflection that the themes of today's reading are eminently suitable for Lent.

“Jesus, what about those Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with the sacrifices at the Temple?” (cf. verse 1)

It has a horrible contemporary ring, doesn't it? Jesus, what about those mothers and babies in the maternity hospital at Mariupol that the Russians bombed?

And for many people who bring sincere questions about suffering to God, it may sound relevant too. The child who died of cancer. The husband and father who went off with another woman. The natural disaster that killed hundreds.

These are not easy questions for Christians who believe in a loving and powerful God. We begin to answer them by talking about God who in Jesus Christ entered unjust human suffering himself. But we may not come to a complete answer, and not everybody wants an intellectual answer, many simply want to be heard and held.

And those who think the problem of suffering trumps the existence of God are deluding themselves. If the existence of unjust suffering is a problem for believing in a loving, just, and powerful God, then the existence of love and purpose are problems for an atheist. How many atheists would push their beliefs to the limit by saying to a spouse, “I have electrical and hormonal responses to you,” rather than “I love you”?

Which brings us to the way Jesus responds to his questioners here. Had they genuinely been seeking God, then surely he would have responded differently. How do we account for his apparently harsh response unless it is that this is one of those trick questions from people who are not serious about following him?

His answer makes sense if that's the case. Not everyone who asks questions about spiritual matters is serious about getting to a point of following Jesus. I once shared digs with an atheist colleague during a work training course. He told me his objections to belief in God. I did my best to respond, but at the end

he said he wasn't interested in changing his mind, he just wanted a good argument.

And so Jesus brings the conversation round to the real issue for those who ask deep questions for frivolous reasons. **Repent.** Jesus didn't call Pilate to repent of his wickedness. He called his hearers to repent. And if the collapse of the tower at Siloam (verse 4) sounds horribly like a first century Grenfell, it's not the architect or the builder he calls to repent but his listeners.

Let's remember that Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, and that when he did so, he characteristically said, "Repent and believe the good news." The good news is that there is a new king on the throne and it's not Caesar. We need to repent in order to conform to the ways of his kingdom.

Jesus was telling his hearers that Caesar didn't have final control over Israel, and nor did the self-interested religious establishment. God was on the throne of the universe in his Person. There would be further good news at the Cross as this God conquered his enemies, the principalities and powers of evil. So, says Jesus, here's the good news – but it's only yours when you repent.

And that repentance is not a one-off act. It's a lifetime of turning back to God, turning our lives bit by bit back to the ways of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

Today, we rightly want Vladimir Putin to change his ways. We abhor what he is doing – and so we should. But we must not let that distract us from the challenge Jesus issues to us, too: repent.

We are all far from the finished article. I hope and pray we can look back at our lives and see where Jesus has changed us already. But his words in today's reading are such that our prayer needs to be something like this: "Jesus, I'm grateful for all the ways you have transformed my life. What's next?"

Well, that could be challenging enough. But if Jesus has already given us what we might construe as a 'negative' challenge in the call to repent – give up certain things, strip things out of your life, and so on – he also has a 'positive' challenge for us. **Be Fruitful.**

We hear this in the brief parable Jesus tells about the unfruitful fig tree in the vineyard (verses 6-8). The fig tree hasn't borne any fruit for three years, and the owner is persuaded to give it one more year by the gardener.

Some people observe that it's strange to talk about a fig tree in a vineyard, but it did happen sometimes in the ancient world. The important thing here to

remember is that Jews hearing about a vineyard will remember that in Isaiah chapter 5 that is the precise metaphor the prophet uses for Israel. The fig tree is someone dwelling among Israel, the people of God, who is not being fruitful.

We know Jesus had a lot to say elsewhere about being fruitful, not least in his 'I am the vine' passage in John 15.

But what kind of fruitfulness does Jesus expect of us? Not literal figs, I hope – I can't stand them! It is of course a metaphor for the work of the Spirit in our lives individually and as God's people. So Jesus expects churches to make more new disciples of him. He expects us to exhibit more Christlikeness as individuals and as a community. He expects us to make a difference in society as, in the words of Jeremiah, we 'seek the welfare of the city to which [we] have been called.'

What if we used this as a report card on our church? Are we making new Christians? Is our love for God and one another increasing? Would our local community miss all the good we do if we suddenly vanished overnight?

I don't know what you'd say, but for many churches today I suspect it might be quite a mixed report. New Christians? Few, if any. More love? Yes and no. Making a difference locally? Maybe, maybe not.

In the parable, the owner and the gardener agree to give the fig tree just one more year. If nothing changes, then they agree to cut it down. Could it be that a spiritual principle like this is behind some of the church closures we see in our time? I know there are other factors as well, but does Jesus actively close some churches because they are no longer fruitful for the kingdom of God?

I have to say, it wouldn't surprise me.

What do we need to do in order to change and improve? Do we need to stop behaving as if the church is all about satisfying our own personal needs and tastes? I believe we do. Do we need to stop speaking to people in the church in ways we never would countenance in our families or at work? Sure. Do we need actively to structure our church life around an outward-looking focus rather than an inward navel-gazing? Yes, I think so.

So in **conclusion**, to come back to where I began by saying this reading had highly suitable themes for Lent, why did I say that?

Well, repentance is probably quite obvious. Lent is a time when we examine ourselves. Often that means we have to put right things in our lives where we have gone awry from the purposes of God. So yes, repentance is a Lent theme.

But so is fruitfulness. Because that too requires self-examination. And I hope I've shown that when it comes to fruitfulness, we not only need to examine ourselves as individual Christians, we need to do the same as churches.

Shocking, then, as this reading may be – it's hardly Sunday School 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild' material – may the Holy Spirit use it that we all, both individually and together, may change for the better, for the sake of God's kingdom as revealed by Jesus.