

Sunday Thought

20th March 2022 Third Sunday in Lent

Readings

Isaiah 55: 1 - 9

Psalm 63: 1 - 8

1 Corinthians 10: 1 -13

Luke 13: 1 - 9

Lent Fly Zone

This week's readings leave many more than one Sunday thought, all battling for attention. Some of them are inevitably linked to current world affairs, not least to those in Ukraine, although we must not forget so many other places of cruel, ruthless oppression and need. However, my first thought is about the simple story by Jesus, found at the end of today's gospel piece. I remember times when I too have stood by a failing shrub, like the new rose I lost last year. It may be the gift of faith or merely my stubbornness but, like the vineyard owner and his fruitless fig tree, I do not readily give up. I suppose Jesus' gardener asked the same sort of questions I do. Are the roots too constricted? Does the soil need feeding? Are the roots too wet, or thirsty? Is the tree under attack from pests? Or is it just a slow grower? I have sometimes prayed about the success of items in my gardens and thought, *'Is God prepared to let it die? It may be in the wrong place at the wrong time but what harm has it done?'* That is the question which prompted Jesus' story.



Some of our Lord's followers were concerned about another recent, appalling act of Pontius Pilate. His Roman forces had murdered several men from Galilee who were protesting about atrocities committed in the Temple area. Typical of the man, he had mixed their blood with the blood prepared for the Temple sacrifices. The question put to Jesus was not a new one. It was the ubiquitous *'Why?'* *'Did the men who died deserve their fate? Was it because of their actions in the house of God? Or because of their personal sinful living? They had been defending the House of Prayer. Why didn't God intervene?'* Racism was part of Jerusalem life. Many residents despised peasant Galileans and would be content to class them all as *'sinners!'* Jesus drew their attention to another recent event when a tower at the city's water source in Siloam had collapsed, killing eighteen men. *'Did they too die because of their sins?'* He asked. *'Was God punishing them?'* There was no question asked about *'building regulations!'*

Words of Paul, written to Christians at Corinth in today's reading, help to explain a common Jewish belief about such tragedies. He recalls the exodus when God's people fled from Egypt travelling towards a new homeland of the Lord's choice.

Many tragedies occurred on the forty-year journey. It was believed that these awful events of hunger, thirst, warfare, dissent, happened because the people had brought about God's displeasure. These things were his punishment. Alternatively, the happenings could be seen as God giving an example and a warning for future generations. Paul assures his readers that Jesus has a different understanding. He has given us assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness, together with the promise of strength to overcome our trials. In what we call the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5 - 7*) Jesus took that further to speak of corporate responsibility. 'You condemn a murderer, but what about the bitterness and hatred in your own hearts. You condemn adultery but what about your sexual thoughts? So, who is to blame for this? Who is to be punished? Are we not all sinners before a merciful Saviour?

I said there were many thoughts this week, but I cannot let my mind wander far from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or isolate it from what I have written so far. Could we really suggest that all those bodies rotting in the streets, or traumatised children waiting for transport to safety, or the Russian people who have been made strangers to the truth, are greater sinners than the rest of us? Or has this been given to us as an example of the product of wrong living? I cannot believe that, but I do try to see my part in it all – my responsibility for a suffering world – for example - taking note of half, or unproven truths, - making ignorant judgements, - broken promises, - unforgiveness All this leaves us wanting to stand with the sufferers in prayer, and trust, and generosity.



Much discussion has flowed about Ukraine's request for a no-fly zone. I thought of that when reading the Isaiah words. He looks forward to the coming of Christ and God's Kingdom when all will be well. But God tells us that can only be achieved when we begin to think on his wavelength. '*My thoughts are as far above yours as heaven is from the earth.*' That's another Lent challenge – to create a personal fly-zone of reading and prayer – keeping close to God's higher thoughts of truth and love. Like the gardener persistently caring for his fig tree, let's keep flying high in the Lent Fly Zone. Don't stay grounded. Maybe even risk turning the engine off for a moment to hear the Lord calling, '*Listen to Me!*'

[A Desperate Prayer to share with the world's desperate people \(and with Psalm 63 in mind\)](#)

Father, I will always believe you are my God
and I will hold on to you whatever happens.
I will still call out to you even when I feel like a thirsty desert refugee,
When, I feel helpless and know I am at my weakest
let me remember your power and glory is the love which will never fail me.
Help me to give thanks for all you have given me and done for me.
Even when I feel empty in mind and spirit, I will look and listen for you.
Then, when I feel you close, I know I shall be '*holding hands with God!*'



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