

Rev Lucas Taylor March 24th, 2019 - Worship AM@WST

Isaiah 55:1-9

55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
55:2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
55:3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
55:4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
55:5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.
55:6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
55:7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
55:9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

13:1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
13:2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?
13:3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.
13:4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?
13:5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."
13:6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.
13:7 So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'
13:8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.
13:9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

REFLECTION

You've heard me speak previously about the giant fig tree in our backyard. I don't know who planted it back in the Wesley Doncaster days, (as our manse was part of that property) but I thank them. It was extremely thoughtful to provide the minister-in-residence not only with an abundance of fruit, but with

an abundance of sermon illustrations.

Living in the presence of this tree for ten years has taught me numerous lessons. For example, it has taught me to be skeptical of biblical literalism. Let me tell you, once you feel how irritating the sap is and how rough and scratchy a fig leaf is, you will realise - there aint no way a naked Adam and Eve were covering themselves with them.

It's also taught me the value of fertiliser - chicken coop.

Last week at the combined Manningham service held at Templestowe I showed you a bowl of figs taken from the tree that morning which I then took after the service, along with your greetings and blessings of peace, to our Muslim sisters and brothers of the Benevolence community in Doncaster. It was Open Mosque Day across Victoria last Sunday and given the terrorist attack in Christchurch had occurred only a few days prior, our Muslim neighbours were in deep shock, grief and fear. They still are today.

I want to thank the many of you who made the effort at short notice to drop by, even if just for a short time. I know the swell of solidarity and compassion expressed has made a difference to frightened and hurt people.

And let me share this image as a visual analogy of that experience. This is the bowl in which I took our gift of figs to Benevolence. You may recall I named a number of our congregation's *values* in the act: risk-taking, giving and receiving hospitality, being relational.

The gift was received gratefully, the figs soon washed, cut up and served to the room on a platter. As it came time to leave the bowl was returned to me, but this time piled high with dates (filled further than when I arrived!). So I return to you with this gift as token of friendship and appreciation from our local Muslim sisters and brothers. We went with a bowl and hearts bearing gifts and left carrying home more than we arrived with. What a blessing.

But I want to share with you also the uplifting hope I felt at that gathering. The compassionate intelligence of some of the young people I met there was inspiring. (and I'm talking both about members of the Muslim community and about members of other faiths and no faith from the wider community who also attended in solidarity.) They are growing up in the most complicated, fast-paced, ever-changing environment the human species have ever known. They are part of the beautiful diversity that is emerging in our society and from that example we can forecast it will be a future of compassion, articulate emotional intelligence and courage to speak your authentic voice.

Our community is going to look different, but I have faith it is growing for the better.

So I have been reflecting this week on the changes we are witnessing, and the truths we are *witnessing to* amidst that change. ...and then the lectionary does its thing. A repeating pattern of a three-yearly cycle through scripture brings us this week the story of Jesus addressing the tragic violent murder of people as they worship... can you believe it?

"there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had

mingled with their sacrifices."

Sometimes familiarity can cause us to read verses like this glibly and fail to take in their significance. This week it seems to stick in the throat a bit more. Some who were there asked Jesus about a recent violent tragedy involving people at worship. This passage is sometimes drawn upon by preachers to explore one of the eternal questions of the human condition - why do bad things happen to good people?

You've heard me previously describe human beings as meaning-making machines. We take the random chaos of life and why tilt our head one way then the other looking for a deeper meaning. I lost my luggage, a car ran a red light and smashed into me, I've been made redundant from my job, a loved one has received a challenging diagnosis. We seek to ascribe the vagaries of life meaning. It must be a sign, it was meant to happen, the universe is trying to tell me something.

As soon as a child falls over they look to their parents (Is this ok? Is this good or bad? How should I react? What does this mean?)

Sometimes the events of life have no greater meaning than simply being the consequences of some unknowable actions or circumstances. A life that ascribes false meaning to events will itself be rendered meaningless.

We need to be wary installing God as the guarantor of (our) meaning, lest we begin to interpret events of life with meaning they do not contain.

So just like this week, in the wake of a tragedy, people are asking Jesus "what does this mean?" and he responded with the story of an unfruitful fig tree and the call to transformation. (Remembering that the word mostly translated as "repent" is *metanoia* which means transform, move the centre of being, or even 'move into your larger mind'.)

So what is the change, the transformation, we are witnessing and what are the truths we must witness to amidst it?

Firstly there is no division between "us and them" and there is no blame upon those who have suffered. Jesus clearly refuses to blame those who suffered the tragedy. For the Queensland Senator Fraser Anning to quote Jesus in his statement blaming Muslims for an attack on Muslims was horrendously misguided and reveals a deeper bias and bigotry. When Jesus teaches us "Love your neighbour as yourself" it is not simply a call to treat others as you would like to be treated, it is also an affirmation that you and I are one, we are connected. Treat the other as you - because they are you - you are one! we are one as we worship here together. we are one with the grieving neighbours of New Zealand, we are one with the frightened Muslims in our town, we are one with all God's creation.

...and if we don't see ourselves as such then we need to shift our worldview, to be transformed.

This truth has been embodied by those who have chosen to wear a headscarf in solidarity. All across NZ non-muslim women, including newsreaders,

politicians and public figures have witnessed to their refusal to be divided by wearing a headscarf. Some have wished to divide and separate, to “other” people into us and them, but instead it has caused people to identify themselves with the marginalised. It is a bit like the famous climactic scene from the Kirk Douglas movie Spartacus - You want to kill Spartacus? Well I am Spartacus! and I am Spartacus! and I am Spartacus!

The breadth of this reading is that it explores both what happens when bad things happen to good people plus when good things happen to unfruitful trees. What are the truths we are witnessing to in our lives? What fruits can be found from our lives? We are reminded: just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit.

The tone of the parable emphasizes that patience and mercy temporarily keep judgment at bay. The role of the gardener offers a crucial characterization of this patience and mercy. The tree has not been left to its own devices. Everything possible is being done to get it to act as it should. Correspondingly, God does not leave people to their own resources but encourages their repentance.

Allegorical interpretations of this parable are unnecessary. Identifying the vineyard owner as God, the gardener as Jesus, and the tree as whoever it is we wish would hurry up and repent--this strips the parable of its force and produces theological confusion. Nowhere else does Luke imply that Jesus pacifies a God who is too eager to clean house.

Instead, the parable's power comes through the suspense it generates. How will this season of second chances play itself out? How do the gardener's efforts make the tree's existence a state of grace and opportunity? (Matt

Skinner https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789)

If we chose to insert ourselves into this parable, I like to identify with both the gardener and the tree. Sometimes the work of transformation means getting your hands dirty, raking round in our muck and waste, spreading it, airing it out so that it might become a source of nourishment.

This event has brought to light some of the steaming piles of muck and manure in our society, and if we are honest the muck we have polluting our own hearts. The racism, the white supremacy, the fear of those who are different, who speak differently, who pray in different ways, our own bigotry, the generational exploitation of colonialism. In this event and in our subsequent responses that has been spread out before us. Our best hope is that it might in fact become for us a source of nourishment, of transformation and of fruitfulness.

May we bear fruit as our witness. May we bear fruit of that which nourishes, not that which does not satisfy.

May we bear witness not only to the transformation that is necessary by the facing up to the manure and darkness in our own hearts, but to the possibility of healthy fruits offered to our world when that manure is spread out and transformed by the gardener.

With our roots emerging from the dark soil and stench of manure, may we reach and grow for the sunlight.

Amen.