

St Mary's Holy Communion 24th March 2019

3rd Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

are you good at repenting? no doubt we often feel shame or regret at having 'done the things we ought not to have done, and left undone the things we ought to have done', as the old confession has it; is that true repentance?

here is a stereotype we hope not to fall into:

A Christian is someone
Who repents on Sunday
What they did on Saturday
And will do again on Monday!

in our Christian life, repentance is always 'in season'; so we have Confession at the start of every Communion service; but Lent is a time to take this deeper; if we are to renew our sense of vocation in Lent – as previous, see web – we need to notice, resist and repent of, turn away from, all that takes us off that path

readings: Luke 13 presents us with an all too familiar scenario – believers killed at worship; here it's Galileans, sacrificing in the temple, murdered by Pontius Pilate's Roman soldiers, perhaps because of some suspected protest or revolt

in our time, we've had Muslims gunned down in a New Zealand mosque; Christians burned in their churches; Jews attacked in their synagogues; there's something vulnerable and exposed about an act of worship, in any faith, where people drop their guard and give their attention to something beyond themselves ... we're an easy target!

Jesus detects an unspoken question behind this story of the Galileans: 'what did they do to deserve it?'; the finger of blame is always poised, ready to point out some fault that must have led to such a fate

Jesus rejects the idea firmly, both here and elsewhere, that suffering is always the result of sin; think of the blind man healed in the temple: 'did this man sin, or his parents, that he was born blind?' no!

likewise for the victims of a 'random disaster' like the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem, that fell and killed eighteen people; again, we can think of plenty of modern parallels; and again, no, they were not worse sinners than anyone else; there is no simple cause and effect at work here; but then comes the punchline, where Jesus says:

'No, I tell you, but unless you *repent*, you will all perish as they did'

we need some context for these harsh and challenging words; is Jesus really saying 'repent or perish', 'turn or burn', 'bad stuff will happen to you too, if you don't mend your ways'?

remember here Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, to face his passion and crucifixion; he is preparing his disciples for what lies ahead for him and for them

chapter 12 contains repeated warnings about being ready for the coming of the master or King; like good stewards or faithful servants, his followers must live in the kingdom now, if they're to be prepared for what is to come;

this is reinforced now by the parable of the fig tree: the owner expects fruit of his tree, or why else should it take up precious soil? three years pass, and still no fruit – is it time for the tree to go, or will he be patient for another year, in the hope of fruit to come? what sort of fruit is Jesus talking of here?

John the Baptist calls on those he baptises to ‘bear fruit worthy of *repentance*’; in 2 Peter 3:9 we read, ‘the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise ... he is patient, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to *repentance*’

so Jesus is saying to us: yes, God is patient and forgiving, but don’t presume upon that; there will be a reckoning, sooner or later, so better repent now! self-examination and repentance are always in season! so keep short accounts with God

as Isaiah 55 puts it: ‘seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord ... for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways’

in Lent, if we are to ‘examine ourselves and repent of our sins’, we need to understand that contrast between ‘our ways and his ways’, between ‘our thoughts and his thoughts’; that is what we hope to do in Lent, by reading, prayer and reflection

another way might be to look at the Commandments on page 2 and 3 of our Lent service book; here the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament are placed alongside instructions from the New

this acts as a reminder that, according to Jesus, sin is more than ‘breaking the rules’ or ‘going wrong’; it is much more the failure to do right, to do good; let’s use these to examine ourselves today, and ask, how have I fallen short in keeping all of these?

‘I am the Lord your God; have no other gods but me’; ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength’

I may not consciously have chosen any other god to worship; but have I loved God wholeheartedly? surely something to repent of there!

‘make no idol; worship God in spirit and truth’

again, who has idols at home or here in church? but is the focus of my life on knowing and worshipping God, or is it mainly elsewhere?

‘do not dishonour God’s name; worship him with awe and reverence’

this is not about avoiding swear words, ‘blasphemy’; but do I treat prayer and worship with the seriousness they deserve? do I understand that I’m engaging with the living God?

‘keep the Sabbath holy; set your mind on things above’

we’re not bound by Jewish Sabbath rules; but is Sunday worship just a brief distraction from my daily concerns; is my mind set on God’s ways for more than the odd hour a week?

‘honour your father and mother; work for the good of all’

here we turn from our relationship with God to relationships with other people; am I humble and servant-hearted, especially towards those nearest to me?

‘do not murder; live peaceably; overcome evil with good’

no, I haven't murdered anyone; but have I sought peace at every turn? have I met difficulty or unpleasantness with patience and love?

'do not commit adultery; your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit'

adultery is one extreme outcome; but there are plenty of smaller steps along the way, that show a lack of respect for ourselves, and others, especially in relation to our sexuality; am I blameless in that regard?

'do not steal; be honest in all you do; care for those in need'

no, I haven't stolen, perhaps; but have I kept to the highest standards of honesty and generosity in all my dealings?

'do not be a false witness; speak the truth'

well, I'm not under oath in a court of law; maybe some small tinkering with the truth won't matter, the occasional 'white lie'? I need to examine my words against Jesus' standard of absolute truthfulness

'do not covet; it is more blessed to give than receive; love your neighbour as yourself, for love is the fulfilling of the law'

covetousness is endemic in our society, and very hard to resist; after all, our whole economy rests on covetousness! and then comes the ultimate test – have I truly loved those around me, even people I don't get on with? there's surely plenty of scope for repentance here!

Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth how the Israelites went astray, despite their 'baptism' in the Red Sea, and the provision of supernatural food and drink, manna from heaven and water from the rock

are his readers doing any better? is there idolatry, immorality, grumbling or lack of faith among them? are they arrogant and complacent, blind to their faults, and in need of a call to repentance? he warns them, 'if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall'

are we doing better? Lent reminds us that we're all at risk of falling, and that we cannot stand without God's help

and here again we find the theme of God's patience, grace and forgiveness: 'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.'; that is very reassuring, isn't it?

when we examine ourselves, when we're honest about our words and actions, our thoughts and motives, and are then moved to repentance, to turn from these things, then God is faithful and just; he will forgive, and help us to get back on our feet and live as pleases him

May God give us grace to hear and receive his holy word, Amen