

Sermon for Sunday 20th March 2022 (Lent 3) 'What are our obligations?' from Fr. Mike
Isaiah 55.1-9; Psalm 63.1-8; 1 Corinthians 10.1-13; **Luke 13.1-9.**

This passage from Luke conveniently divides into two parts, verses 1-5 and verses 6-9.

Part 1 - Tragedies of the day (13:1-5)

The passage refers to two events that were probably familiar to ancient audiences. The details, however, have been lost over time, as Luke is our only source of information about these tragedies.

The gruesome mention of Pilate's mingling the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices appears to refer to a massacre of a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem. The narrative does not reveal *why* Pilate slaughtered these people, but the deed nevertheless corresponds with what other historical writings reveal about Pilate's penchant for brutality. The verse offers an ominous characterisation of the Roman governor in advance of his appearance in Jesus' trial.

Perhaps Jesus refers to a tower in the wall around Jerusalem when he speaks of "the tower of Siloam." Apparently, a structure collapsed without warning and crushed eighteen hapless Jerusalemites.

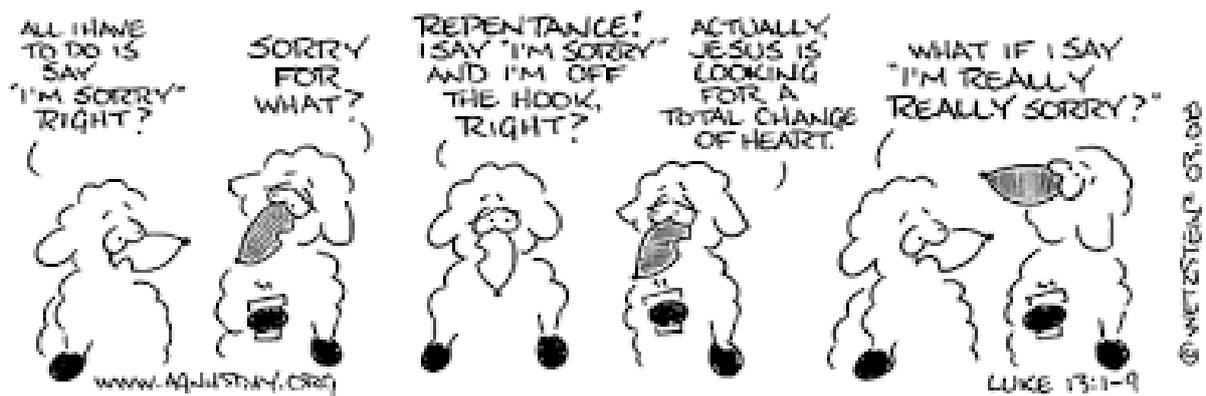
When Bad Things Happen to Unsuspecting People (13:1-5, continued)

Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been subjects of recent conversation around the local watering hole – one being an instance of state-sanctioned terror, and one a random accident. Both saw people snuffed out with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason. Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to appreciate that our existence is

both precarious and precious. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong, and nothing that caused their demise. Like Hobbes, He characterises life as capricious - nasty, brutish, and short.

Although these events might allow Jesus an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe, he does not go down that route. Jesus only implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come.

Jesus wants to talk about repentance (turning)



Life's fragility gives it urgency. Jesus turns attention away from disasters, victims, and "why?" questions to address those of us who thus far have survived the hazards of the universe and human society. We should not mistake our good fortune as evidence of God's special blessing.

The need for repentance is a universal condition, shared by random victims and finger-crossing survivors. When Jesus emphasises (twice) that it will not end well for any of us unless we repent ('... **except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish**') like the others did, he does not promise that the godless will be struck by an asteroid. He refers to death in an

eschatological sense, a destruction of our very soul. He emphasises the suddenness with which this death comes. Just as Pilate's and the tower's victims did not enjoy the luxury of choosing the time of their demise, likewise the unrepentant will suddenly find they have delayed too long and lost themselves.

Is Jesus exploiting tragedy to score theological points? It certainly looks as though he capitalises on the memory of recent horrors to stress the suddenness of death and the unpredictability of life. We are justly made wary by the fear mongering that some evangelists are prone to whip up after every natural and unnatural disaster. But notice that Jesus' approach follows a slightly different path. He does not promise freedom from calamity – instead he urges his hearers against false self-assurances. If life's fragility demands urgency, that urgency shows that life itself has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness, as the following parable suggests:

Part 2 - When Good Things Happen to an Unsuspecting Fruit Tree (13:6-9)

Jesus' short parable about a fig tree speaks of imminent judgment. The parable reinforces ideas from the first half of this passage. A cultivated yet unproductive tree may continue to live even without bearing fruit, only because it has been granted additional time to do what it is supposed to do. Unless it begins to bear fruit (an image of repentance, according to Luke 3:8), the result will be its just and swift destruction.

Like Jesus' earlier words in response to the recent tragedies, the parable warns against false reassurance. **Just because you have not been cut down, do not presume that you are bearing fruit.**

The tone of the parable emphasises that patience and mercy temporarily keep judgment at bay. The role of the gardener offers a crucial characterisation of this patience and mercy. The key point is that 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 up his house.

Instead, the parable's power comes through the suspense it generates. Will fruit emerge in time to thwart the axe? How will this season of second chances play itself out? How does the gardener's efforts make the tree's existence a state of grace and opportunity?

Natural disasters and man's inhumanity to man

We must remain true to the movement of this biblical text. However, our primary focus is on the fact that all tragedies arrest our attention. They shake us out of the complacencies or stupor that we use to get through ordinary life. They impress upon us, better than any preacher's words, the perils of our existence. But tragedies also lead many of us who observe such events at a distance – through word of mouth or round-the-clock newsfeed – to protect ourselves with rationalisations and false assurances.

Do we build our lives upon those rationalisations that allow us to get through the day feeling blessed, safe, and able to presume upon a better fortune than that of our Ukrainian and other less fortunate sisters and brothers – both the victims and the still-impoorished and perpetually at-risk survivors? **Or, do we build our lives on the knowledge that God’s judgment is certain?** Do we build them on the efforts that God, like the parable’s gardener, undertakes to prepare us for that judgment, especially during Lent?

God transforms us through **grace**, a grace that calls us to be generous toward those still trapped under the weight of poverty, need, and devastation of all kinds. As people of faith, we are obligated to do what we can, wherever we can, to alleviate unnecessary tragedy, injustice, or suffering. The question to ask ourselves in this point of our collective history is:

Are we responding correctly - adding value by doing our very best, or not?

I commend this prayer for us all, which might be advisable (considering current events at home and abroad) to commit to memory...

**Oh God, the searcher of hearts,
help us to see ourselves in the light of your Holiness;
That we may turn from our sins,
receive your grace and forgiveness,
and learn to know, love, and serve you better. Amen!**

Fr. Mike Sunday 20th March 2022 (Lent 3)