

Sermon for Sunday 20 March 2022

3rd Sunday of Lent Year C

Isaiah 55: 1 – 9; 1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 13; Luke 13: 1 – 9

Difficult decisions

In these turbulent times – especially for those who live in Ukraine and Russia - there are many people having to make difficult decisions – and often these decisions have to be made very quickly. Yesterday on youtube I heard a young woman called Olga describe how she and her friends decided to leave Ukraine in the early days of the conflict. One of her friends had a car, another could drive – so three or four of them set off and came to the UK. She told us how difficult it was not being able to say goodbye properly to her parents who are left behind. As we know, hundreds of thousands of people are making those sorts of decisions, balancing up the dangers of staying in their homes against dangerous journeys. Either way the future must feel very uncertain. All of them

have left people behind. On the other side, in Russia, some are also making courageous decisions to risk imprisonment by protesting on the streets or by statements on the media. Over 280 Russian Orthodox priests have signed an open letter calling for an end to the invasion of Ukraine and warning President Putin that God will be his judge.

The war of words and of propaganda extends far beyond the borders of Russia and Ukraine. We are all caught up in this. In wartime it is very easy to feel that ‘our side’ is completely right and everyone else is wrong. The truth is usually more complicated than this.

When Paul wrote his letter to Corinth, the church there was very sure of itself, very confident. They were lively, thriving and growing and somewhat arrogant because of their spectacular spiritual gifts. But there were a lot of problems in this Christian community. In the chapter we heard this morning Paul compares them to the people of Israel during their wanderings in the wilderness. Despite

being rescued from Egypt by God and provided for in the wilderness, God's people sinned in various ways and did not stay faithful to Him. The Corinthian church, similarly, had been greatly blessed by God, but is full of flaws, weaknesses and sins. So Paul warns them "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall" (v12). As we busy ourselves with supporting the people of Ukraine we too may think it's obvious that we are on the side of right. But that doesn't mean we are without flaws and sins of our own. We too need to repent.

Our Gospel passage is focussed on repentance too. Someone tells Jesus about some Galileans who seem to have been slaughtered by Pilate within the Temple precincts, and Jesus himself recalls an accident when a tower near the Pool of Siloam collapsed and killed eighteen people. In both cases Jesus says these people were not particularly sinful. We should not assume that these sorts of events are God's punishment. These people were no worse than everyone else living in Jerusalem. But Jesus warns "unless you

repent, you will all perish just as they did". In other words, again, "if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." We all need to repent.

The parable of the fig tree which follows in our Gospel reading is a more hopeful way of looking at the same thing. It may even have been a funny story when Jesus told it with the man looking hopefully for fruit on his barren fig tree and the gardener digging in manure. Earlier in Luke's Gospel John the Baptist tells the crowds to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Luke: 8). Genuine repentance leads to fruit-bearing. God is patient and will nurture us and hope for some fruit like the gardener in the story, but His patience does not last for ever.

Repentance is not a one-off thing when we first become Christians or something we do occasionally when we are aware that we have let God down badly. The word in Greek is 'metanoia' and it means 'change of mind'. It can be just as much an attitude of the heart which acknowledges that we don't know it all,

we're not all right and we're constantly in need of God's forgiveness and grace flowing into our lives. It's those who have the deepest faith and have been on the journey longest who are often most aware of this, and of their own shortcomings.

Praise God that He is always waiting to be gracious to us (Isaiah 30: 18). Like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son again and again He welcomes us back. Or as our reading from Isaiah 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, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." (Isaiah 55: 6 – 7)

As God pours out His forgiveness, his healing and his Holy Spirit into our lives, the result can only be that we produce more fruit – and who knows what difficult decisions we might then be called to make as we are drawn to serve Him in new ways.

It can take courage to really repent, to change our minds, but God remains always loving and gracious, as we shall be singing shortly –

"Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve: because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come.

Amen