

Tragedy and Turning (The Fig Tree)

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Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Stories of Hope (Parables in Luke)

Texts: Luke 13:1-9; 2 Peter 3:3-13

On Friday 15 March 2019, just after lunch, a far right extremist walked into the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch New Zealand and opened fire on those assembled for Friday prayers. After killing 44 people he drove to the nearby Linwood Islamic centre and took the lives of 7 more people before his arrest. Barely a month later on Easter Day suicide bombing ripped apart 269 worshippers and tourists in 3 churches and 3 hotels in Colombo, Sri Lanka. On Boxing Day 2004 after an enormous 9.2M earthquake a tsunami swept around the Indian ocean washing away nearly 230,000 people. We find such tragedies overwhelming. We ask why? How could this happen? What did those swept away do to deserve this? You don't have to be especially religious to ask this question. Indeed tragedies like this raise deep questions for the believer. How could God allow this? Where is God in the face of suffering? Maybe you've asked that question yourself.

We've been walking with Jesus as he teaches his disciples on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. We've been listening in on the stories he told and learning from them what it means to live as a disciple - as a follower of Christ the king of God's kingdom. Today we're looking at the parable of the Fig Tree in Luke 13:6-9. Jesus tells this parable as part of an answer to that question in the face of tragedy: why? I imagine that whether you're a believer or checking out this whole Christianity thing you will want to know Jesus' answer.

The parable of the Fig Tree is part 3 of his answer, so before we come to it, let's have a look at how the question is put to Jesus, then parts one and two of his answer.

The question.

"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices." Pilate of course is famous for presiding over Jesus' unjust trial. But even outside the Bible he is well known from other ancient writers. As the Roman Administrator of Judea he had a particularly bad relationship with the Jews. The Jewish historian Josephus records that he tried to bring Roman standards into Jerusalem which the Jews considered idolatrous. He used money from the Temple to build an aqueduct and then brutally crushed the rebellion that resulted. Here we discover that he had killed some Galileans who had gone to Jerusalem while they were sacrificing in the temple. That violence in places of worship in New Zealand and Sri Lanka is not new. People experienced it in Jesus' day.

Part 1: Suffering and Sin

When people ask me "why does God allow suffering", I know that often there is a personal story behind the question and so I try to respond gently. But here Jesus' answer seems

direct and confrontational: *Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*

Jesus’ answer draws out what can so often be an unstated assumption. Those who died had done something to deserve their deaths. This, if you like, is the law of karma. When I was a teenager Savage Garden sang *I believe in Karma what you give is what you get returned*. They meant it positively, but if you turn it around you find a dark underbelly. If what you get returned is tragedy, then you must deserve it. But Jesus says NO. There is no necessary connection between tragedy and people’s sin. God was not using Pilate to punish the Galileans because of particular sins. The 44 people who were killed in the Al Noor mosque were no worse sinners than the 269 people killed in Colombo, or you or me.

This first example highlights suffering that is inflicted by human agents. We might think that yes, we can see this tragedy happened because of human wickedness: But what about suffering that clearly has no human agent behind it? Is suffering caused by natural disasters God’s judgment on sin? Some Christians have made this argument. In the wake of the Black Saturday bushfires in February 2009 in which 173 people perished, Pastor Danny Nalliah of the somewhat unfortunately named Catch the Fire ministries in Melbourne proclaimed that the bushfires were God’s judgment on Victoria for decriminalising abortion. I wish Pastor Danny had paid more attention to these words of Jesus. Read with me verse 4.

4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

This building accident is an example of what you might call a natural disaster. There was no harmful intent by human agents behind it. It just happened. In this second example Jesus says there is no straight line from natural disasters to God’s judgment.

Now that is not to say that God cannot use either human or natural evils as instruments of his judgement. The plagues of Egypt are described as God’s judgment on Pharaoh, and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem as God’s judgment on Judah. But we only know that these were God’s instruments of judgment because he tells us this in Scripture. Without that special revelation we cannot draw that conclusion. Jesus doesn’t.

Part 2: Tragedy and Turning

Jesus says that suffering is NOT the result of God’s judgment. But he does challenge us. *Unless you repent, you too will all perish.*

How are we to take this? The word translated “too” could also be translated as “likewise” or “in the same way”. Taken this way the sentence would read, *Unless you repent, in the same way you will all perish*. Some commentators argue that Jesus is here warning his immediate Jewish audience. If they don’t change the direction they are going, if they don’t abandon hopes of a political rebellion against Rome and instead recognise that he is their Messiah, then the sword will fall. The nation will perish at the hands of Rome, like the Galileans in the temple. The walls of

Jerusalem will fall like the tower of Siloam had. At the end of his journey from Galilee as he approached Jerusalem, Luke records Jesus' weeping and saying:

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

This in the end did happen in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed and Israel as a political entity ceased to exist until 1948.

Other commentators read Jesus' words as a general warning to all people. Faced with the certainty of our own death and the coming day of judgment Jesus calls all people to repent. Whether it is Jesus' first coming and the national judgment that followed or his second coming to judge the living and the dead, either way Jesus' point is clear. Such tragedies are an occasion for repentance; for us to turn back to God.

The word repentance can be one of those words that sound religious but which we have no idea what they mean. The Greek word is *metanoia* and it literally means to "change your mind". In Colossians, St Paul says that before Christ we were *alienated from God and enemies in our minds because of our evil behaviour*.¹ Here we see the importance of both the inner and the outer life. Jesus' himself was constantly critiquing the religious leaders of his day that despite their outward piety, inwardly their hearts were far from God. Real change you see is not just behavioural change, it's inner heart and mind change. That is where real transformation comes.

Martin Luther described sin as the self turned in on itself. To repent is for us to turn from self to God. And in that uncurling we are opened to his light and life and to see and serve those around us. Tragedy, suffering. These are moments when we catch a glimpse that we're trapped in the prison of the self. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, CS Lewis writes, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain pierces our self enclosed hearts and tells us something is wrong. I've seen it when conducting funerals. People who would never otherwise be interested in God are open, just for a brief moment. Jesus says, "Don't let that pass you by! Seize the moment! Turn to God and find freedom and life!" Will you seize the moment? Will you turn to God? Will you receive the life he offers you in Jesus?

Part 3: The Parable of the Fig Tree

Jesus explores what that repentance, that change of mind looks like in his parable of the fig tree. (You were wondering when we were going to get there!)

¹ Colossians 1:21

“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. 7 So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

8 “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

It’s not worth our worry trying to work out the finer distinctions between the fig tree and the vineyard or the owner and the gardener. The parable applies to Jesus’ first Jewish audience and to us and its message is clear. Earlier John the Baptist had warned Israel - *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance! ... The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*²

Now Jesus picks up his message. True repentance involves fruit. That change of heart and mind towards God will produce a change in how we treat those made in his image. It will mean we don’t walk past our neighbour lying battered and abused on the road. It will mean we care for the poor. It will mean that we see ourselves as stewards of God’s gifts, not masters of our possessions and those around us. Loving God will mean that we offer our bodies to him as living sacrifices. We belong to him and not ourselves.

This will take time. Change often does. And sometimes it will require some work on the soil - breaking it up, fertilizing it, watering it. That means putting ourselves in the place where we are being ploughed and watered by God’s word, being open to the Holy Spirit to work in us. Concretely that means turning up where those things happen - church on a Sunday, Bible study groups, your own daily time of prayer and reading the Bible, and making yourself available to serve, if not at church then somewhere. Turn up, willing and open and God will use these things to grow you. You will produce fruit. All those beautiful fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control. Not all at once or all in the same measure, but they will come.

As those fruits grow in you, and as you offer yourself and the gifts God has given you to his service, you can have an incredible impact in the world. God can use you to bless others. God can use you to bring light where there is darkness, hope where there is despair, healing where there is brokenness. The question is, will you put yourself in a place where you can be cultivated? Will you let God till the soil of your heart and dig out the weeds and rocks which stop you growing? We all need to hear Jesus’ warning. God wants fruit in our lives. Good trees respond to cultivation and bear good fruit. Dead trees bear no fruit. I’m not much of a gardener, but I can see growth and fruit in many of you. But I cannot say all. And I’m not talking about those of you with tender consciences who ask “Have I been bearing fruit?” Let me tell you: You have. I’m talking about those of you who don’t even get close to asking that question. You whose character

² Luke 3.8-9

is just as selfish as it was 10 years ago, if not worse. Jesus doesn't pull his punches. The axe is ready to cut down any tree that doesn't bear fruit so the soil can be freed up to grow other fruitful trees. Unless you too turn back to God and seek his mercy, you will perish.

We began with the problem of suffering. Jesus tells us that personal tragedy and suffering is *not* God's judgment on sin. But every tragedy is a wake up call. It's a reminder that while those whose lives are lost in tragedy are no more guilty than others, all of us stand guilty before God. And yet that is not the whole story. Because there was one who was truly innocent. He was tried by Pilate. His blood was offered as an undiluted sacrifice for the guilty. He gave his life so that all who believe in him might not perish. He is with us in our suffering. As we turn to him, as we trust him, as we remain in him, by the power of the Holy Spirit we will change and bear much fruit to his glory.