

Sermon - Pam Richardson

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What we can learn from the fig tree

What is the question all parents of two-year olds dread most? 'Why?' of course!

We never grow out of asking why, especially when disasters happen. In the gospel from Luke we have examples of two such disasters. The first was man-made - The grisly 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. We don't know why Pilate slaughtered these people, but the act agrees with what other historical writings tell us about Pilate's brutal nature. The verse gives us an idea of Pilate's character in advance of his appearance in Jesus' trial.

The second disaster could be classed as a natural one – the Tower of Siloam was one of the towers in the wall around Jerusalem which apparently collapsed killing 18 people.

We could be asking ourselves – and God – why disasters such as these are still happening today. A brief glance at the news has us asking why people were killed in mosques in New Zealand or why so many people were killed in South Africa as a result of Cyclone Idai.

We have our own personal questions too. I'll share one of mine. My niece, Julia, was born when I was 11. We weren't a large family and this was a great event for us creating much excitement. Later, Julia was joined by Gail and they both grew up into intelligent and thoughtful young people.

When she'd completed her 'A' Levels, Julia went to Liverpool to study medicine. She loved the place, her course, and by and by a handsome young fellow student. One day, on her way back to her flat, and within sight of it, she was knocked from her bicycle and killed. This led to other questions = why was someone under-age driving? Why was the car not his? Why was it not insured? Why couldn't the jury know that he had killed before in a similar way? It all seemed so unfair.

When tragedy hits someone else, whether it is a tragedy caused by evil people or one caused by some natural disaster, we all talk about it. We're glued to the TV set, watching the details over and over as they are reported. But, when it's over, most people go on unchanged, with no thought of how it applies to them. Jesus here shows that we should immediately take it to heart by asking, "What if it had been me? Would I have been ready to stand before God? Have I truly repented of my sins? Is my life pleasing to the Lord?" Because the fact is, sooner or later, it will be me!

Both kinds of events lead the rest of us to realize how precarious our existence is. Jesus implies that the victims did nothing wrong. Jewish belief was that whatever evil befell people was a punishment for sin. The more a person had to suffer, the greater their sinning must have been! Jesus rejects this simplistic idea. Instead he emphasises repentance.

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

Whoever was asking the questions of Jesus, they expected a sympathetic response from him. In any victim-culture (and Israel rightly feels victimised by Rome) stories like this demand some sort of 'Isn't it awful?' response. Acceptable responses range from 'Those damned Romans!' to 'Let's drive them out!'

Jesus denies that the Galileans suffered because of their sins, but calls his listeners to repent or they will suffer for theirs. What happened to the Galileans is history, and nothing can be done about it. The fate of Jesus' listeners, however, is still negotiable. Jesus does not condemn them, but instead shows them the way. His purpose is to redeem. While not all tragedy is the result of sin, sin sometimes leads to tragedy. Jesus' listeners have sinned (as we all have), and he calls them to repent so that they might escape disaster.

In the passage, when Jesus is confronted with these questions, rather than answering them head-on, he turns the question back on them, from why to what. He tells us that rather than asking why, it would be better for us to ask what our reaction should be. Jesus suggests that there is an urgency about the need to repent because we could be caught out, like the victims of disasters, and not be right with God. This urgency points out the need for us to seek God's Grace which can't be earned by being good, and Jesus illustrates this with the parable of the fig tree.

The parable reinforces ideas from the first half of this passage. A vineyard is a common metaphor for the people of Israel, and the fruit to be expected from Israel is Godly living. Jesus' listeners would understand this connection as Jesus tells this parable.

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 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.

The gardener, if the landowner agrees to leave the tree another year, will not leave the tree's salvation to chance. He will loosen the soil to insure that water finds its way to the roots. He will fertilise the tree with manure. If the tree is redeemed, it will be the work of

the gardener that saves it. This is good news! Our judgement will take place under the watchful eyes of a redeemer whose purpose is to save rather than to condemn.

The story ends without telling us whether the owner accepts the gardener's offer, but Jesus leaves us with the notion that he does. Any reprieve, however, will only be temporary. If Israel does not repent, the gardener will have no choice next year but to obey the owner. The axe will come out of the shed – no further negotiation will be possible.

Unlike Luke's violent imagery, Isaiah's beautiful poetry uses imperatives to create the same sense of urgency. His images may be gentler: come, buy and eat you 'who have no money' but his purpose is the same. God wanted his people to return to him by remembering why they were chosen. They were being called away from their frantic lives, to lives filled with purpose and love. It was not too late. There was still time and they would be forgiven. Turning to God refreshes and renews us. It gives us the opportunity to get a new perspective on life, reorder our lives and focus on what is worthwhile.

It is not too late for us either. God is calling us too, away from a life that does not satisfy to a life that does. Our ways can be God's ways. Our thoughts can be God's thoughts when we find rest and security in the ways of the Lord. It's not that we have to drop everything we're doing and go and be missionaries in a foreign land. What Isaiah meant was for his listeners to abandon our hectic lifestyles and do what we can, where we can.

At this point I'm bound to return to the Emergency in southern Africa and those 2.6 million people affected by Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. If you feel you would like to respond and haven't done so yet, I have brought along some envelopes which you'll find at the back of the church.

So, let's take an honest look at ourselves, recognize and acknowledge harmful habits, traits, or patterns in our lives, pray to God and begin new lives.

Amen