

**St Botolph's Church Worthing**  
**Third Sunday of Lent, Isaiah 55: 1-9, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13, Luke 13: 1-9**  
**Father Roger Walker**

Today, as we give thanks for God's gift of Reuben and Leo to Carl and Amanda, I wanted to find something upbeat and encouraging to draw out of our Scripture readings. We started well with Isaiah telling us of God's love and power- and asking us to 'seek the Lord while he may be found and call on Him when he is near'. Words that echo what we are seeking to do in our worship this morning – although we were reminded that we are not always going to understand how God is working through our lives. For he says 'my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways', and we can all look back and see how God acted unexpectedly in our lives – even though we did not recognise this at the time.

Who knows what God's plans are for Reuben and Leo leading on from this act of thanksgiving, which their parents have been moved to – but which the boys at this stage in their lives do not understand. When we move on to our second reading, from 1 Corinthians, things get a bit blacker. St Paul is writing about the way that the Children of Israel did not follow God's commandments during their journey through the wilderness, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. They worshipped the golden calf rather than God: they were immoral: they complained and grumbled. And as a result 'their bodies were scattered over the desert' – not very cheerful stuff, but it *is* Lent.

As St Paul says 'these things happened to them as an example and were written down as warnings for us'. So he ends – do not be complacent: you could fall into temptation just as they did – with the implicit warning – and you could end up as they did. The only chink of light in this Reading is the promise that God will not tempt or test us beyond what we are able to bear, but lots of us could bear witness that he sometimes takes us right up to the line!

So let's forget about 1 Corinthians and see if our Gospel Reading is any more encouraging. It doesn't begin well – speaking of people being killed in an uprising against the Romans in Galilee and 18 people being killed when a wall fell on them at Siloam in Jerusalem. The point that Jesus is making here is quite a serious theological one. The Jews of his day believed that if misfortune came upon you it was because you had sinned, and conversely if you were healthy and well off it was because you were good. He is seeking to disprove this and making the point that we are all sinners and need to change our lives, to repent, and save ourselves from perishing eternally. That would have left everyone feeling worried, and so he continues with a parable:

A farmer has a fig tree that for three years has given him no fruit, so he tells his labourer 'it's useless, cut it down'. But the labourer calls for one more chance for the fig tree, and promises to dig around it and manure it. If it bears fruit next year: wonderful. If not, then it really is for the chop.

This, Jesus is saying, is how God works in our lives. We may appear quite worthless to Him because of our sins, but he gives us another chance. And we have to ask: what does it mean that God digs around us and manures us? We have to put this into spiritual terms and God digging round us signifies that he gives us His Grace. Grace is a theological term that we often use, perhaps without understanding its real meaning. Grace is defined by theologians as the 'free, unmerited gift of God'. That still does not sound very understandable, so look at it this way: God opens us up, emotionally and spiritually, to receive what He wants to give us.

You see why the parable says He digs, and what He wants to give us will vary with each individual. It starts with faith and leads on to a calling to serve God in a particular way. God pours grace on us, but He gives us free will: we can say no to Him. And that's why so many people do not accept Him into their lives. But if we say yes, then we can draw help and goodness from the manure God spreads around us, first and foremost from His word – the Bible – as we are trying to do in our reflections this morning, and then in our times at prayer.

In this inspiration we receive from god's Holy Spirit and the help we receive from Christian brothers and sisters. All this and much more is God's manure for us, but we can refuse it. If we don't read the Bible: if we don't pray: if we are not open to what the Holy Spirit and other Christians are saying to us – then like the barren fig tree we won't bear any fruit. But if we are open to God's grace then he can do wonderful things in and through us. Today our great prayer for Leo and Reuben is that when they grow up they will be open to God's grace – come to faith in Him and serve Him faithfully. You, Carl and Amanda, and their godparents, have to help them do this and in every way you can lead and guide them in the way of Jesus.

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

14.2.16