

**Luke 13.1–9**

Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Cor 10:1-13

Whenever we want to find out the latest news, whether international, national or local, we can simply do so by switching on to BBC News 24 or Sky News, or by using our mobile phone or tablet to access the website of one of the many broadcasting companies. And if we wanted to hear the latest about what's going on specifically in *our* area, then you can read all about it in the *Worthing Herald* or its up-to-date website. I've even signed up to a website called *nextdoor.co.uk* through which one can keep abreast of what's going on just in West Worthing, and to see if anyone's saying anything about 'that priest at St Botolph's'! By contrast, in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine, the *primary* means of spreading around the latest local news, of course, would have been by word-of-mouth.

And so, in our Gospel reading today, we come across some folk who pass on to Jesus some

local news about a (presumably) recent tragic event that had taken place - "At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." That's all we're told about this rather obscure incident, which is not mentioned in the other Gospels. So what's it all about? Well, to answer this we need to look first of all at the possible details of the event itself, then at why the anonymous tale-bearers might have told Jesus about it, and finally—and most importantly—at the way Jesus took up the story and made it the basis of some important teaching.

Now although we have no further details about this particular rather gruesome episode, there *is* quite a lot of well-known background information to draw on. Firstly, the incident involves Galileans. Galilee was the northern boundary of the province of Judea, away from the influence of the authorities in Jerusalem. It also had a mixed population, the number of

foreigners living there giving it the label 'Galilee of the Nations'. These factors led to Galilee gaining something of a reputation as a hotbed of agitation against the Romans who occupied the land at the time —what today we'd call an insurgency. So to turn up in Jerusalem with a Galilean accent was sure to arouse some suspicion. To the Romans, the presence of Galileans probably meant trouble.

Then next on the cast list is Pilate. This is Pontius Pilate the Roman Governor of Judea, familiar to us from his role in Jesus's crucifixion, and portrayed in other sources of the time as a heavy-handed and insensitive man, especially where Jewish religion and the Temple were concerned. The reference to the Galileans' sacrifices shows that the incident we're interested in took place at the Temple in Jerusalem; that was the only place in the first century where Jews could slaughter and offer sacrificial animals. And the reference to the Galileans' *own* blood being mixed with that of

their sacrifices, can only mean that Pilate's soldiers had attacked and killed these suspected insurgents in the very precincts of the Temple itself. That was outrageous, but it was very much in-keeping with Pilate's reputation.

So, we can now picture the incident itself. But why should anyone go out of their way to tell *Jesus* about it? And why should *Luke* bother to record it? Well, the answer lies four chapters earlier in chapter 9 verse 51. Because at this point, there's a sharp break in Luke's narrative, and a new phase is opened up with these important words: "When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem; and he sent messengers ahead of him." So begins a long journey that only ends at the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and then all that was to follow during that first Holy Week. It's a journey to which Luke devotes nearly half his Gospel.

So now, we can at last make some sense of why Luke, and only Luke, has these anonymous gossips tell Jesus about Pilate and the slaughtered Galileans. Remember that Jesus himself is a Galilean, and so are the core of his followers. And, as he has already made clear in advance, he is going to Jerusalem. He will arrive for the feast of the Passover. Pilate will be in town for what was always seen as a time when trouble could be brewing – a bit like the protestant marching season in Belfast. So the warning of how Pilate is currently dealing with Galileans is of more than passing interest, both for Jesus and for his followers.

Now we don't know the *precise* reason why these folk chose to tell Jesus about this tragic incident. Perhaps they had a genuine concern for Jesus's safety. Or maybe they were government agents wanting to scare Jesus away and avoid a confrontation at the festival. Either way, it makes no difference to Jesus and his plans to spend Passover in the city. He

effectively ignores their warning – he isn't going to be thrown 'off track' by this – he remains absolutely obedient to his Father's will, that he go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die.

And indeed, instead of listening to the warning given by the tale-carriers, he issues a warning of his own. What the Lord does in response is to touch upon quite a natural reaction people have to hearing about such an atrocity like this – namely, 'why them? What had these particular Galilean pilgrims done that was so awful—so awful that God allowed them to suffer such an appalling fate?' And the answer folk would tend to come up with is that they perished because they were especially wicked and God was punishing them. Still today, what might pass through our minds when we hear of disasters occurring is 'I wonder what *they* have done especially wrong to deserve this?' Surely it's the law of karma - 'what goes around, comes around', and all that kind of stuff...!

Well, what the Lord is basically saying here is that they (and *we*) are wrong to think in this way. “Do you *really* think that because they suffered in this way they were *worse* sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but *unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*”

Whatever reaction the tale-bearers expected from Jesus to their news of Pilate’s atrocity, it certainly wasn’t *this*. Far from being scared or defensive, Jesus has taken the initiative by moving to another disturbing aspect of the piece of news they have told him. Why do bad things happen to innocent people? And what Jesus is basically saying here is it’s because *no-one* is as innocent as we think they are – “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”, as Paul puts it in Romans 3:22. So instead of gloating over *other* people’s sins, says Jesus, *you* just repent of your *own* sins or *you* will suffer the same fate. Then he underlines the message with an example of his own; those eighteen people who died when a tower collapsed - they were *no*

worse than any of their neighbours either, but unless *you* repent *you* will all perish just the same.

It’s so easy for us to point the finger at *others* when it comes to sin, and fail to take a good look at our *own* lives and our *own* sinfulness – *our* need for God’s mercy. That’s why one of the key themes during the season of Lent is that of repentance – what it means for each of *us* to turn back to the Lord, resolving to walk more faithfully in his way. As the prophecy of Isaiah challenges us, “let [us] return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on [us], and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” We might think that because we come to church regularly and receive Communion that we’re doing just fine, but are we really demonstrating the fruits of repentance in living a godly life? The apostle Paul, in our epistle reading, writing to believers in Corinth, reminds them of the way in which, centuries earlier, the people of Israel had constantly given into temptation and done what

was evil during their wanderings in the wilderness; as a consequence, they incurred God's judgement. So, Paul's warning to the Corinthian Christians and to *us* today is, "...if you *think* you are standing, watch out that *you* do not fall."

Which brings us to the final element in our Gospel reading - the little parable of the fig tree, which seems at first to be disconnected from what precedes it, but which belongs precisely here, alongside the accounts of the two disasters. The underlying message of the slaughtered Galileans and the victims of the falling tower is the *suddenness* of divine judgement and the need for us to be always ready to give an account of our lives. Once again, as Isaiah warns us, "Seek the Lord *while he may be found*, call upon him *while he is near...*" God, through Christ, is summoning *us* to accept his mercy and his way *now* – while there is time. That's a serious warning and not to be ignored.

Yet there is a bit more. The parable of the unfruitful fig tree enters a plea for more time to put our house in order, to let our repentance take effect. "Let it alone for one more year," pleads the gardener with his master. "If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." The ending is left open. We are not told the fig tree's fate; and that's because—when it comes down to it—the fig tree represents *us*. The way the story ends is in *our* hands, and the message is clear - 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand'.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for your constant mercy and grace, totally undeserving though we are. Help us, each day, to show forth in our lives the fruits of repentance, to your praise and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.