

## Cathedral Eucharist – Third Sunday of Lent



### Readings

[Isaiah 55.1 – 9](#)

[1 Corinthians 10.1-13](#)

[Luke 13.1-9](#)

March 20<sup>th</sup> 2022

I wonder how your Lent is going this year? If you've given things up, or taken something extra on, whether you're still on track. If, like me, the last few months have been quite a challenge in itself—for me through a period of illness -. one might be tempted to feel it's time to give yourself a break rather than tighten the belt even further.

You know that we must be well into the season of Lent when we hear Jesus saying things like: "I tell you ... unless you repent, you will all perish". On the whole we much prefer Jesus in his kinder and gentler moments. And yet, we somehow understand that the season of Lent is a challenging season. But then, there's the words from Isaiah in this morning's first reading about the richness and generosity of God - for me some of the most evocative and moving words in the Old Testament.

Perhaps our starting point is to understand that from the outset the New Testament calls repentance "good news". Think back to Mark chapter 1:

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

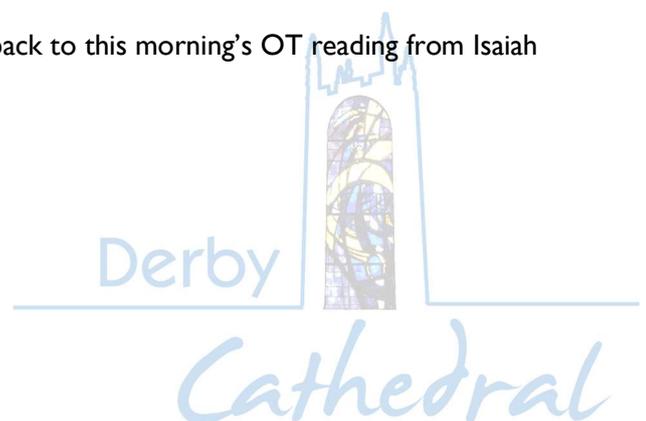
In truth, of course, the call to repentance, both then and now, often falls on deaf ears. Jesus, in this morning's gospel is challenged by those who ask questions about the connection between suffering and sinful living. Try telling that to the war-ravaged people of Ukraine, though of course, 'What have we done to deserve this?' is so often the irrational but understandable question in people's thoughts if not on their lips. And at one level Jesus says quite categorically that there is no such connection. But then he turns the question around, pointing to the areas in their own lives where they need ask themselves if they are travelling in the right direction and their need to repent. It is a message that few were eager to hear in Jesus' time, and no less so now. At one level think of the addict who refuses to accept that the pills or the bottle are leading them towards their own destruction. And if that is easy because that is talking about someone else's problem and not our own, well think much nearer to home. We hear the message of global warning and yet the decision whether to get in the car to nip round to the shops when we could easily walk, or we turn the heating up when we could put on an extra jumper is probably more to do with the hike in fuel prices.

Think of your own examples.

Repentance has the ring of bad news about it, especially when we don't want to hear the message.

So, how to get the message across? Well that brings us right back to this morning's OT reading from Isaiah 55.

Listen!  
everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters:  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.  
Why do you spend  
your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy? ...  
Incline your ear, & come to me;  
listen, so that you may live."



The call to repent in Isaiah is not so much a command as an invitation. This is the heart of repentance for us too. Repentance. In Greek 'metanoia'. In English, literally, to turn around. To repent is to change direction. And repentance begins with recognising those ways in which our lives are heading in the wrong direction. And then the good news is that there is still time to turn things around. This is Isaiah's message, offered in the original context to the exiled Israelites in Babylon, submerged in a foreign culture, forgetting the ways of God:

“Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord,  
that he may have mercy on them,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

This, too, is Jesus' message in the parable in this morning's gospel about giving the barren fig tree another year. There is time, says Jesus, to turn and enter the kingdom of God. There is another season for the barren fig tree that has born no fruit. Time for the tree to be pruned, nourished and tended so that life may yet appear.

So notice that repentance is not feeling sorry for your sins. Repentance is a decision to turn things around. It is deciding that we have been wrong in supposing that we could make our way through life relying on ourselves. Repentance is a decision to place our trust in God. It is that which gives repentance the potential to be good news rather than a burden. Not a call for us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but a call to recognise our dependence on God. How often in my thirty years as a parish priest, offering advice to those beating themselves up about their own inadequacy, did I find myself saying, 'Stop trying so hard.' You can't do it by yourself. Allow God to forgive you.

The gardener's insistence, in the parable, on giving the tree more time to fruit points to God's grace. In grace God withholds judgement. At the smallest sign of our willingness to repent, to turn towards God, God strengthens and encourages us. And when, in our eyes, our repentance seems inadequate and we are ready to condemn ourselves, God's grace makes up the deficit. God draws near and calls us deeper into himself. So Lent is a time—a breathing space, or retreat, if you like—to review our lives and meet with God in repentance; not wallowing in our own inadequacy, but rather, 'Seeking the Lord while he may be found and calling upon him while he is near.'

And one final point from today's parable. Blindingly obvious but easily overlooked. The owner wanted to cut down the fig tree because it wasn't bearing any fruit. Specifically figs. The owner is not threatening to cut down the fig tree because its failure to produce apples and pears. Only figs. The Owner of the Vineyard doesn't ask anything of the fig tree beyond its capability. Only that it accomplish what fig trees ought to accomplish.

And for us, one of the keys to faithful Christian discipleship is as obvious as that. God does not ask us to become what we are not. The fig tree was only required to produce figs. No more. You and I are asked only to discern what our God given gifts are and to give it our best shot. But, we are asked to accomplish that much.

God is not asking that we produce more fruit than everyone else - or better fruit than that which our fellow Christians - but he does invite us to produce the fruit that we have the potential to produce. To take what God given gifts we have and use them to the best of our ability.

So, Lent is always a good time to ask ourselves whether we are bearing the fruit that Christ invites for us to bear - in our workplace, in our homes, in our communities, in serving him? We're not asked to be something we are not. Just to be the best that we can be - crucially, not in our own strength but in God's.

It's where repentance ceases to be a burden and becomes good news.

**The Revd Richard Andrews, Canon Precentor**

