

The Third Sunday of Lent, 2025

Lk. 13:1-9

Why do bad things happen to good people? Alzheimers, brain tumours, road accidents taking wonderful people ... why is life so unfair?

It'd be a lot easier if bad things happened to bad people. Even if it was harsh, life would then make some sort of sense. Divine karma. They had it coming.

That's always been a tempting way of looking at the world. Lots of the Bible sees it that way. Of course, lots of the Bible *doesn't* see it that way too. It's one of the most interesting debates that runs throughout the Bible: another reminder that far from always being clear, the Bible is often made up of vigorous debates.

That said, in this debate, Jesus himself comes down pretty clearly on one side. In today's Gospel, people are asking him about two recent disasters. Pilate's men had massacred a group of Galilean pilgrims to the Temple. And then a tower collapsed, killing eighteen people. Why? What was God up to? Had all those killed been specially bad in some way? Did they have it coming?

No, says Jesus. No. They were no worse than anyone else. They weren't singled out for special divine punishment. Stuff – even really terrible stuff – just happens. Vicious soldiers, collapsing towers – that's just what life is like. There's no point in looking for special meaning in it.

But... and here's the bit it will be harder for us to hear. Unless you repent, says Jesus, you will all perish, just as they did.

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In other words, what happened to the pilgrims, and the people under the tower, are just typical examples of our collective situation, of what's true of each and every one of us. In the end, *all* of us are headed for disaster, headed for ruin. Whether it's falling masonry or a Roman sword or an awful diagnosis or just plain old death, in the end, for each and everyone of us, things fall apart. We end in ruin, in futility.

Now panic not. I promise you, there's a corner coming in this sermon, and round that corner there is a story of hope.

But it is worth just pausing here, before the turn, and recognising quite how stark, quite how harsh, bluntly how *terrifying* Jesus is. We have a tendency, don't we, to prefer nice Jesus. To make a contrast with the God of the Old Testament, who we see as grim and frightening and nasty, whereas Jesus is lovely and kind and cuddles sheep. Surely, we say, Jesus loves everyone. Jesus accepts everyone. And yes, of course, there's a sense in which He does ... but it doesn't stop him from also being crystal clear about the danger he thought we were in. The danger he thought we should be scared witless of, that we *needed* to be scared witless of, so that we'd change. Jesus, apparently, didn't worry too much about using fear to make his point.

That's one reason why we have this Gospel in Lent. We're being invited – we're being sort of forced – to see ourselves through Jesus' eyes. Eyes of love, yes, definitely – but also eyes of truth, eyes which see things as they really are, without spin or illusion or sentimentality. And things as they really are, says Jesus, are grim. We, as we really are, are in deep, deep trouble. We need to turn round – that's what the word 'repent' means – and go the other way.

So what's the problem? What's wrong with us? Well, Jesus seems to say, the Bible seems to say, collectively and individually we have been facing the wrong way. Walking the wrong way, living the wrong way. We have not, as the words at the beginning of our service have it, loved the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, all our strengths, and loved our neighbours as ourselves. No, our love has been all over the place. We've loved all sorts of other things: pleasure, success, power, cleverness, money, comfort – choose your foreign God. And people who make such things the centre of their lives, who set their hearts upon them, are destined to live in a world falling apart, a world destined for disaster. Turn around, now, before its too late!

Well, it might be challenging enough to accept that we actually *need* to repent. It's startling to be told that everything is not OK, that *I'm* not OK, *we're* not OK. It might need time for that to sink in, to become real for us. Remember, though, that it's Jesus who said it, not just me. Be careful before you decide he doesn't know what he's talking about.

But let's say, for now, that we *do* accept it. That, yes, we need to repent, really urgently need to repent. What exactly does that mean, and how do we do it?

Well, what it doesn't mean is making a list of all the bad things you've done in your life and feeling sorry about them, or even saying to God you're sorry. If you do that sincerely, of course, it's not a bad start, not at all. Probably very good for you. But repentance is in a way a lot simpler, and a lot deeper. It's not so much about making a list of individual bad things, and more just of recognising the truth about yourself. Saying to yourself, and saying to God, I've really stuffed it up. I've got lost in all sorts of things. I'm not sure how I'm meant to live, and I'm certainly not sure I can do it. I need help, God. At some fundamental level, I'm broken. Please help.

That's repentance. That's the one thing God is looking for: 'I'm broken, please help'. That acknowledgement that you are out of your depth, that you're sinking, that you need Him to pull you up.

And here is the Good News – I did promise you the corner was coming! God is desperate, desperate, to save you. He loves us. He did not mean for any of us to end in ruin, whatever we've done, however we've failed. If there's the slightest glimmer of repentance, the slightest beginning of a person turning, and crying for help, God is there to seize that person, to throw his arms around him, to bring him home. Remember the Prodigal Son, in Jesus' famous story? He'd barely begun to get his little speech of sorrow out before his Father flung his arms around him and welcomed him in. God doesn't wait for some perfect repentance, some perfect holiness... all he wants is the beginning of a turn. That's what the Cross is all about. God's come looking for us, come right into the heart of our darkness. When we were still far off, you met us in your Son, and you brought us home.

Bringing us home, incidentally, does not mean that on the way we're going to avoid disasters. Towers might fall. Any of us might get that diagnosis, any of us might have a car slam into us. Stuff happens, even to those who repent. We *know* that, don't we, by bitter experience. Stuff happens. However, and this really is the critical difference. If your life is set on God, if the deepest thing about you has become love for Him, and for what He wants... well, this stuff, all these terrors, all the things that frighten, they're suddenly not so real anymore. Come car smash, come Alzheimers, come total failure.... These things no longer terrify. These things lose their power. As St. Paul puts it, in words it would be worth learning by heart: 'what then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or nakedness, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

As people who have stuffed up, who know they've stuffed up, who've cried to God for help, who go on crying for help, we are not destined to die. Whatever life throws at us, come what may - thanks be to Jesus, we are headed for glory, and nothing, but nothing, can stop us.

To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.