

There Is A Little Time Left

Lent 3, Year C

Luke 13: 1-9

7 March 2010

The most quoted Christian comment on the recent earthquake in Haiti must surely have come from televangelist Pat Robertson, when he opined that Haiti is cursed as a result of a pact made with the Devil to get rid of the French in the 19th century. No doubt Robert Gibbs, White House spokesman, voiced the thoughts of many when he said, “It never ceases to amaze me, that in times of amazing human suffering, somebody says something that could be so utterly stupid. But it, like clockwork, happens with some regularity.”

Still, the connection between calamity and sin has come up often, even in the Bible. Apparently Jesus was invited, as we heard this morning, to have a Pat Robertson moment, with some candid comments on recent tragic happenings. Some Galileans had been cut down by Pilate’s security forces in Jerusalem, presumably as a result of some kind of demonstration. In another incident a tower has unexpectedly toppled over, killing 18 people. As John Nolland writes:

While in verses 2-3 we were dealing with the act of a cruel leader and perhaps of people who “asked for it” by their political activity, now we are probably to think of an “act of God” falling randomly on those who just happen innocently to be present.

Instead of getting drawn in to an analysis of the sinfulness or innocence of the people concerned, Jesus invites his hearers to forget about worrying about what other people have or haven’t been getting up to, and to concentrate instead on their own

spiritual and moral standing with God. The point at issue is that the web of life is fragile, it can be broken at any time by human malice or by random accidents, our time is short, and therefore each one of us needs to be prepared for that moment when God draws a line through each human life.

If Jesus had left it at that, this would just be a thought provoking wisdom saying, unremarkable in the history of religious thought. But there is much more at stake here. In the person of Jesus, through the words and signs of his preaching and miracles, God's full and final offer to the human race has become available. It is on offer first and foremost to God's special people the children of Israel. The offer will only be available for a limited time, as advertisers say, "Hurry while stocks last." The consequences of not taking up the offer will be serious.

The religious code word for serious consequences is "judgement," and the code word for taking up the offer is "repentance." These are unpopular words in the late modernity that we are living through. In our cosseted lives in the first world we live longer than human beings ever have. This gives us the illusion that we will be around for such a long time that there is no hurry about getting ourselves sorted out. And in our well regulated, highly organised societies big calamities are rarer than they used to be. This generates the illusion that we are in control. But more than that, post enlightenment liberal thought, with its highly individualised way of thinking about human rights, takes considerable exception to the idea that God will have the last word on our lives. As for the notion that the measuring rod that will be put across our lives at the last will be God's

holiness, his inner qualities of being, this is a deeply scandalous notion to our contemporaries.

Lets be clear about this – judgement starts with the house of God, and then works its way outwards. We are judged by a higher standard than our unbelieving contemporaries, because we have been privileged with insider information about what God is up to, and what he expects of his followers, and of people in general. Also we have more of an idea about what repentance involves – that turning around of your life that develops from the appalled perspective of how shabby our lives look to God.

But judgement isn't just something that happens to individuals. It applies also to local churches, to national churches, to worldwide Christian denominations, to societies, to countries, and to empires. And it occurs both in this life and the next. As John Nolland puts it:

Luke sees the judgement of God as falling on people in the flow of human history, after death, and on the final judgement day.

In that three fold perspective on what judgement amounts to we must reckon with the possibility that a parish, or a denomination, might by its lack of belief, superficial Christian life, or scandalous actions, lose the mandate of heaven, as God turns away from it in disappointment, anger, and sorrow, and leaves it unaided by grace to face the consequences of its foolish choices. Sometimes he does more than that. The prophets of Israel made it clear that sometimes the righteousness of God confronts the sinfulness of the people of God in jealous wrath. This is not vindictive revenge seeking, but is rather about bringing the people of God back on track through purifying suffering. God

wouldn't be doing his people any favours by letting them become more and more lost in their own confusion. So he confronts us to heal us.

But judgement and repentance is also of great importance to each of us as individual Christians, particularly in Lent, the season par excellence of repentance. Repentance adds up to rather more than just adding one or two extra devotional practices in to our routine for a season. The note struck in this morning's gospel reading is one of urgency. The by line is, "There is a little time left." The key word is "little." Action must be taken now. There is no time to lose. Perhaps sooner than we think we will be on the threshold of God's future world. This future is not just the outcome of random happenings in our present time. It is a place and space that God knows the contours of well, for it is present to him in his eternal now. It is a place and space where death and sin has been excluded. Therefore those who are in collusion with death and sin cannot be there. Therefore grace filled changes are expected of us so that we will more and more come to share in the characteristics of the holy God whom we will share this future world with.

For the people of the Bible justice was a commodity in short supply. It was hard to find an honest politician and an uncorrupted judge. For them judgement was a good word, it was something to be ardently looked forward to. It described the occasions, and the ultimate time when God would rebalance the world in moral terms, dealing to the corrupt and the cruel who had got away with murder, and raising up and vindicating the powerless and the victims of history. Repentance, then, involved making the kind of changes in your

life that made sure you would be on the right side of the ledger when that ultimate sorting out took place.