

Sunday 23 March 2025, 3rd of Lent, Parish Eucharist

Luke 13.1-9

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

Why do bad things happen to good people? As someone who was raised a staunch (and slightly starchy) Calvinist, I admit I've never really resonated with this question. To my mind, the more interesting question is 'Why do good things happen to bad people?' Yet, for some reason in our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus seems utterly disinterested in either formulation of the question. He doesn't care about ascribing either responsibility or blame (which is often the emotional context for asking why good and bad things happen to the deserving/undeserving). He's more keen on pointing out that opportunity is around every corner.

Thus, when told the gruesome tale of some Galileans who were murdered by Pilate, he responds with something resembling a lack of feeling. Basically: Do you think they deserved it because they were bad? You will perish too if you fail to repent. He then mentions others, apparent victims of an awful accident. *Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*

For Jesus, the question of why a thing happens is less important than how we choose to respond. When we see suffering, do we try to figure out who is responsible and apportion blame? When we suffer ourselves, is our impulse to ask why, try to reason our way to the supposed source of that suffering, and do away with it? Or if we can't, at least hold a grudge that will make us feel self-righteous enough to offset some of our emotional discomfort?

We might call these are 'fig-tree' moments, after the parable Jesus uses to respond to the problem of suffering. A fig tree is not bearing fruit, says a man; it should be cut down. But the wisdom of the vine-dresser suggests another way. A tree might just need some fertiliser and some extra care. The best fertiliser in the ancient world, you may recall, was manure. You want fruit? Get out the manure and pile it on.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus meant us to understand the manure to be suffering. The difficult and painful things that happen to us all might well be opportunities. Whether or not we're good people could, in this framing, depend entirely on how we respond. Do we understand ourselves to be experiencing manuring, fertilising? Do we bear fruit because we're able to see how suffering might be an opportunity for repentance, greater dependence on God, spiritual nourishment? Might it be that sometimes we're put through a bad experience precisely in order to stress us into bearing fruit?

The fertilising of the fig tree is its opportunity and its second chance. Glass Door- with whom we partner to support those who are homeless and need support or who are moving out of homelessness and need someone to aid with the bureaucracy, are a second chance organisation. For them, the pain and the discomfort and the stress of homelessness are not to be seen as punishments- bad things happening to good people. No one deserves to become homeless, and

there's not much value in apportioning blame. This difficulty is an opportunity to be responded to. The response they guide towards is one of growth, bearing fruit in the community, and being a stable, health fig tree. Bad things happen to all kinds of people. What matters is how we respond, and how we help others respond when they need us most. Cut the fig tree down? No. Help it instead to bear fruit again. Amen.