

### Lent 3: "Whose fault?"

Isaiah 55: 1-9; Luke 13: 1-9

It's often said that one of the most unattractive features of our modern life is our blame culture. Nothing just happens. If something goes wrong someone always has to be blamed, held to account, and preferably made to pay. It's one of the reasons our kids don't go on school trips and doctors pay a fortune in indemnity insurance – because our instant reaction in any mistake, or accident or tragedy is to look for who we can blame.

This is when you realise that there is in fact nothing new under the sun, because in today's Gospel we see Jesus dealing with the very same thinking but giving it a very different twist. Who was to blame for the outrage of those Galileans slaughtered in the temple, or the eighteen who died maybe because some builder skimped on the material? Was it those poor people who died? Was this because of some sin they'd all committed?

This is the very same question raised in the story of Job where his infamous comforters, witnessing him suffer one blow after another, can't think of any other explanation: Come on, Job, admit it; you must have done something to deserve all this. As they say, with friends like that... But they're wrong too.

And it's not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition that you see this kind of thinking. Over the years I've been very interested in Buddhism and all that we can learn from it. But in a television programme a year after the Tsunami you saw what, for me, is one of its less attractive aspects. The programme was examining how different faiths responded to all that tragic loss of life. They interviewed a young Buddhist mother whose three little girls had died, and her response was heart-rending. It was simply their karma, she said, of her own children, the result of some sin in their previous lives.

But Jesus says these things are not anybody's fault, or at least not down to anyone's sin. You see him dealing with the same question when he heals the man who'd been born blind. Again, "Who sinned, Lord? Was it this man or his father? And Jesus gives the same answer. This has nothing to do with anyone's sin.

Sadly the Christian church can't afford to take any high moral ground here because we sometimes get it wrong too. I'll never forget years ago attending a charismatic healing meeting where a man with a supposed healing ministry tried to heal a young disabled man who had terribly distorted limbs by casting out the demon of sin in his life – a misunderstanding of the healing ministry that, in my view, verged on abuse. Not unsimilarly the view that HIV and AIDS are God's judgement on sinful individuals comes from the same stable of religion turned sick, than which there is nothing more damaging.

But what Jesus does with this warped tendency that we all have to blame, is to give it a new twist. When we look at the horrors that go on in our world, our response shouldn't be to seek someone to blame; but to make us realise how precious *is* the gift of human life and how precious is every moment of life and breath that we are given – life is not to be wasted.

So what Jesus does is to turn all of this back on his audience, as he so often does by summing the whole thing up in a parable. Enter the poor old fig tree. Which hasn't done anything wrong; but its purpose is to bear figs. The judgement of the impatient master demands that this fruitless tree be cut down, but the gardener intercedes for it for another chance, for another time of watering and nurturing to try and coax it to bear fruit. The parable is obvious. Israel is the tree. We are the tree. We are not put here just to take up space, but to bear fruit. The message of the Cross and Resurrection is that through Jesus there is always another year, another chance to allow him to break open the parched earth of our lives, our arid ground and water our hidden roots and bring us to new life.

Lent is just one special time when the Church tries to make us deeply conscious of something that is a reality for us all the time. Christ is the one who is constantly interceding for us, who – if you like – refuses to allow any blame to attach to us, but who is urgent in wanting to water us and renew us and make us really live and bear fruit.

In one of my favourite films, “Good Will Hunting”, Will – played by Matt Damon - is a deeply troubled but highly gifted youngster (a mathematical genius as it happens) who falls foul of the Law once too often and part of his rehab is to be made to go for sessions with a wise and warm-hearted psychiatrist, played by Robin Williams. The relationship between them is often troubled, and they both learn from each other, but in the end the psychiatrist sees where the boy's pain is coming from – namely from the condemnation and abuse meted out to Will by his own father.

In a breakthrough that is simply beautiful, but very tough, the psychiatrist faces Will with the truth, becoming the father Will always deserved: “It's not your fault, kid”. “I know”, says Will, with a shrug. “It's not your fault”. “I know”, says the boy still playing the tough guy. “It's not your fault”, the older man persists. “Hey, cut it out, don't mess with my head, don't do that,” the boy starts to shout. “It's not your fault, it's not your fault, it's not your fault”. Until the boy breaks down in tears of healing and release and falls into the arms of the older man. Knowing that none of this has been his fault gives Will a second chance, it gives him the chance to really live and use his gifts – to bear fruit if you like.

From the Cross God says, again and again, until we finally get it and believe it: It's not your fault. Now go and live. Now go and bear fruit.