

23rd March 2025 – Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9

GOD OF PATIENCE AND LOVE

The questions of life, as we often put them, are? Who? What? When? Where? And, ‘Why?’ A sixth one, ‘How?’, sometimes pops up in there as well, but I’m going to leave that out here. These are questions we apply in investigating, evaluating, analysing many situations. Whether we are talking about a natural or scientific occurrence, or an historical event, a current happening on the world or national stage, or even something in our own lives, these are the questions we might often go to as we look to make sense of these things: who caused and who was affected by what happened? What actually occurred? When did it begin, reach its climax, and end? Where did it happen? And why did natural elements act or react in that way, or a person or group of people do the things they did?

In looking at those questions, in many ways the first four are different to the last one; they are objective, provable facts. Quite often scientists, or historians, or contemporary commentators, will agree on the Who? What? When? And Where?, but it’s the why that brings out the differences of opinions. The climate is changing, we can largely agree on all the facts about that, but why is it so? Worldwide politics are swinging to left, or the right, or back to the middle again, ‘yes’ again to all the facts, but why is it so? It’s not always easy to pinpoint the ‘why?’ is it, because that’s the area where our own beliefs and values come in also.

‘Why?’ The debatable question. One area in which this question is often raised in our world and in our lives is in relation to the bad things which happen; suffering in our world. You may well have been asked by non-Christian friends and family, ‘if God is so loving and so powerful, why do children and innocent people often die? Why do bad things happen to good people?’ It’s a hard one to answer, and people often find it hard to accept when we say, ‘I don’t know, I really can’t answer that’. It’s a question which militant and public atheists like to hone in on; how can God be real if this is happening in the world? And you’ve very likely asked this same question yourself about things which have happened to you, or to people you

love; why, Lord? Why is this happening if you love us all? Jesus asked this same question on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mat. 27:46 CEV*)

Why do the bad things happen? Many religions and belief systems, and Christians at times even today, have pointed to God’s punishment for our wrongdoing as the reason for bad things happening. The Jewish people of the Old Testament and Jesus’ time often believed this, with Job’s friends, after he had lost everything, saying, ‘Mate, you must have done something really bad to make God so angry with you.’ Jesus is once asked the question by his enemies about a blind man, ‘who sinned so that man was born blind, him or his parents?’ (John 9:2). As people, it’s easiest for us to think that any kind of bad occurrence or suffering is the result of our actions, and vice versa. It’s a similar belief to that of Karma; what you do determines how you are treated by the world. But when we think like this, we cross that line from faith into superstition, believing that we are in some way responsible for all that happens. Why do the bad things happen in our world and in our lives?

In the Gospel account we have here, from Luke 13, Jesus addresses, not answers but addresses, this question, even though He is not directly asked it. He is told about some people who were killed by the Romans while they were offering sacrifices. Knowing what those who are telling Him this are thinking, Jesus says, ‘Do you think that these people were worse sinners than everyone else in Galilee just because of what happened to them?’ (v. 2b) He reminds them about a tower which fell over in a nearby town, killing 18 people, and again says; do you think they were worse sinners than everyone else? The warning is not to look at these events as punishment for people who have brought God’s anger and punishment on themselves, but to see them as reminder of our mortality and a reason to examine our relationship with God and to turn back to Him.

There are two key things which Jesus is teaching us here. The first is that if these people were punished in these happenings to them, so would we all be. Again this view of people being punished for their sins by God is common in Bible times, in most if not all religions, and still today. In the ‘80s some Christians were saying that AIDS was God’s punishment on homosexuals and drug users. After the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 some Christians were saying that this was God’s punishment against Muslims, and I

even had one Christian tell me that ALWS shouldn't be sending them aid because if God is punishing them why should we be helping them? What's Jesus' response to that; if God is punishing those people for their sins, then you would be punished also. Do you think you are any better than they are? There are numerous answers people give to the question of suffering, but the 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!' one is an answer Jesus speaks directly against. Don't look at any of these events as a way to judge others, but as a reminder to look at yourself and your own relationship with God.

The second thing we learn here, which Jesus shows us clearly in the parable at the end, is that the bad things which happen don't show us that God is a God of anger and quick judgment, but a God of grace; a God of patience and love. A God of second chances, and of second, third, fourth, etc, as long as He can. When the man wants to cut down the unfruitful fig tree, the gardener says, 'give it another year'. God wants to show us His grace, His forgiveness, that's why He sent Jesus to die and rise for us. In patience and in love God has done and is doing everything He can for us to be with Him. But our rebellion, our sin, has consequences, both now and forever. This is the hard bit for us: God gives us as many chances as He can, until the time is gone when He can no longer do that; and we don't know when that will be for us. The call then is to know God's grace in our lives, and to respond to that in love, worship, repentance, so that we can know and experience the new life He wants to give us. And then, even in the midst of our hard times we can know His love for us.

That question of 'why is suffering in this world?' is still there for us though, isn't it? The problem is that it's not really possible to give a clear answer to it which everyone will be happy with. And those who are trying to run down our faith, and even we ourselves, aren't always satisfied with that; I know there have been times when I've wanted a clearer answer. We can say these things are the result of sin in the world, which is true, but that still doesn't always help us when innocent people are affected. I've personally found that when people try to answer this question too definitively, they end up being tripped up and defeated by their own arguments. We can't always answer the "Why?".

What we need to do then, is to come back to the question which I left off at the beginning; 'How?' There is the Gospel. There is the good news of Jesus' coming to answer this question not in words, but in

His action of dying and rising for us. In the ‘How?’ we see God’s response to the problem of sin and suffering in the world; to become a part of it and to offer us the way out of it. In the cry of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we hear Jesus suffering for us. In Jesus’ innocent death for us we see how much God loves us, how strong His patience is, how wide His grace is, as He does everything He possibly can to bring us back to a forgiven and loving relationship with Him. In the empty tomb three days later, we have the promise that whatever we go through in this life that promise of new and glorious life is there for everyone who turns to Him. In my experience, many times, being in a room where someone is dying, even a young boy, that person is at peace knowing the ‘How?’ of God’s love for them, even while family and others gathering around are still asking the ‘Why?’ We don’t, I believe, have a clear and understandable answer to the question of ‘Why?’ bad things happen to us and in our world, but in Jesus we see how the God of patience and love comes to us in these things and wants to lead us to the better life beyond them.

If we can’t always answer the ‘Why?’ from the list of life’s questions, in this case the ‘How?’ of God’s love for us in Jesus gives us the comfort and support to move through them and to the hope for what is beyond. As we now reach the middle of this Lenten period, we focus on the path which Jesus, in love, took for us to the cross. While there are many questions we have about happenings in our world and our lives which we just can’t answer, looking to Jesus and all God does for us through Him we know that we have a God of patience and love. May the ‘How?’ of His love call you to turn to Him, have faith and trust in Him, and follow Him, in all we go through now and in the life to come. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Are there times when you have asked God ‘Why?’ because of what you or others were/are going through? Have you found an answer for this question? Has this question ever affected your faith or the faith of others?
- Does knowing the ‘How?’ of God’s love and response to suffering help you in these situations? If you are still struggling about any situations, bring that struggle to God in prayer, and perhaps talk about it with someone?
- As people often ask us about the ‘Why?’ of suffering, what are some ways we can offer them in the ‘How?’ of God’s patience and love in response? If you get comfort and strength from this, how can you share that with others?

Pray: thank God that we know He is a God of love and patience, not punishing us but doing all He can to lead us back to Him. Ask Him to help us find strength and peace in the ‘How?’ of His love and patience, and to help others to see this as the answer to their questions also.

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