

Difficult stories

Isaiah 55.6-9; 1 Cor.10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9

The readings today are not the easiest for a preacher who wants to proclaim the love of God in today's world. They would be excellent material for preachers who want to proclaim that God is to be feared. You think of that great story of the hell-fire preacher who was painting a terrifying picture of eternal damnation, with brimstone and fire and the gnashing of teeth. An elderly member of the congregation said – but I don't have any teeth. The preacher thundered back 'Teeth will be provided!'

Paul is writing to a church in Corinth that appears to have had huge problems. They had some very confused theology – you think for example of how they were competitive about spiritual gifts – especially the glitzy ones like speaking in tongues – and Paul has to try to get them back into perspective – with those famous words about 'faith hope and love' in Chapter 13 being headed as 'the best way of all.' They also had distinctly dubious patterns of behaviour. They also had people who thought they were better than the rest, in their beliefs or their behaviour. And it seems to be at *them* that Paul addresses his strong words that we heard about God striking people down in the desert days of the Old Testament.

I would like to think that we have moved on from that image of God as the touchy, impetuous God who zaps anyone who gets of the wrong side of him. But clearly Paul hadn't – or hadn't entirely, because the way he talks in this passage we heard today is by no means typical of him. I wonder if he is like many of us – we normally don't give in to the rather primitive ways of thinking we all have within us, but when our patience is tried enough, those darkest feelings emerge, we lash out. It is clear that he was getting pretty fed up with the Corinthians – and if the scholars are to be believed, the two letters we have from Paul to them are not the only ones he wrote, and he found them a considerable trial.

The clue may be in those words towards the end 'So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.' The risk of thinking you are better than others is the most seductive of all positions to be in. And it often goes hand-in-hand with being the kind of people who condemn others. They tut-tut at others because they are not like that. The others have fallen prey to some dreadful weakness, but the speaker is different. Paul knows that we are all in the same boat, and that kind of spiritual one-upmanship or pride is not on. I shall return to that idea in a while.

That also ties in with the stories we heard from Jesus in the Gospel. We can't be sure of the exact circumstances of the first incident that he talks about – but it appears to have been an act of political chicanery on the part of Pilate. He has had some people from Galilee killed whilst they were offering sacrifices in the Temple. So this hot news about a dreadful act of savagery isn't so different from the

stories we get with depressing regularity in the news today. Maybe when we are appalled by the way some people in power around the world have behaved, it helps us to get in touch with how appalling it must have seemed to those people talking to Jesus. But the implication is that the people Jesus is talking to have decided that these must have been particularly bad Galileans, who deserved it. Similarly, the people killed by a falling building in Jerusalem must have been especially sinful to have deserved such a fate. Jesus is talking to people whose religious mind-set was that it is perfectly appropriate to connect individual tragedy with individual sin. At this point he doesn't argue with that (although he does in other places). He simply challenges the assumption that the victims of the temple massacre or the falling tower are any more wicked than anyone else. So he comes at it from their perspective saying in effect 'If you reckon that getting slaughtered or crushed happens because you are bad – then watch out, because it could just as easily happen to you.'

But really, you say – I'm *not* like those dreadful people. I'm *not* in the same boat. That's precisely the point that both Jesus and Paul are making in different ways. We are not entitled to separate ourselves off from others like that. The stories of God zapping people in the Old Testament are largely about whole nations – within which there would be the whole gamut of people from really very good and holy to very impious and wicked. But they all get carted off to Babylon, or whatever, good and bad alike. It is why there is always a communal and whole-earth perspective to be taken into account. *I* may not be a violent person, but I am part of a society which allows violence. *I* may not consciously exploit people who are less-well off than me, but I am part of society which does. I have to share the guilt of the group. I have no personal indemnity which says that I don't count towards that wrong-doing. When someone commits some dreadful atrocity, we have to face the fact that he or she is a fellow-human being. Whatever it was they were trying to prove, it was because they felt hatred which provoked them to terrible wrong-doing. And that is part of the world's dysfunction, the world's sin. It is all the same as the point John Donne made about never sending 'to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee'. We are never isolated from everyone else.

The message from both Paul and Jesus is 'Repent' – a piece of religious jargon, of course. Let's just re-translate it literally: 'Think again'. We need to have a different mind-set, to face in a different direction. That will always apply to us as individuals and as the human race. So it can be more than a little depressing, and you may not be feeling very good about my putting this in front of you. But it is realistic. It is the truth about the world as it is, and us as we are. We all need re-orientating in God's direction.

But today's readings are not all gloomy news. Jesus goes on to talk about a fig-tree which has failed to produce any fruit. The owner says to the gardener – 'It's a waste of space – pull it down.' But the gardener asks for patience – let's do all we can to encourage it to fruit. If that doesn't work, then so be it. The story of the Bible could be summed up in that story – of God giving us yet another chance to prove that we can do the right thing. And if we do, then there is even better news, as we heard in the

reading from Isaiah – ‘Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’

Let me tell in closing about an amazing lady I heard at a meeting of Churches Together for Families in London some years ago. Pat was a West Indian woman trying to do something to support young black people in Clapham. She lived on an estate where people are afraid to go out, where drugs are so common she said you never get away from the smell of cannabis, where prostitution are rife, and where the teenage pregnancy rate is astronomical. She told of helping to deliver the baby of a 12 year old in a Yardie family – who refused to let her get any help. She spoke of the problem of the absent fathers, and the children who come to her youth club so starved of paternal affection they virtually mob the white Dad who helps out. She talked of how they embarrassed her by their appalling behaviour on a Devon holiday she arranged. She had no doubt about how she summed up the situation ‘What is going on in these children’s lives is wickedness’. But instead of tut-tutting and standing apart, she was throwing herself into help in whatever way she can – by bringing up the child of a drug-dependent mother herself, by running clubs and workshops for youngsters, by becoming a member of the Primary Care Trust for the local Health Authority. But she was not setting herself apart from them. The time she got closest to tears was when she was telling us about refusing help at a supermarket when she was juggling shopping and a toddler, simply because she knew the woman offering her help was a prostitute. She wishes now she could find her again to apologise for treating her so badly. She sees herself as responsible not only for trying to help these youngsters, but also responsible for their plight, because she is part of the society which has allowed that situation to arise. Maybe that is why they respect her in the way they respect few others. She stands alongside them, listening to them, not apart from them and judging them. She wants them to repent – but if that is to happen, then so must she.

When we read of the terrible events that happen so frequently – gun and knife crimes in our own country, devastating abuse of people in many countries worldwide, we may well want our world to change, to think again. But if that is to happen, so must we.