

LUKE 13:1-9
WHY?

Why? How many hours are spent trying to find an answer to this question! There is something deep inside us that feels the need to try to answer the “why?” question. We need to find a reason for things, a rationale for what happens to us and it needs to fit! But trying to find answers to the “why?” question is such a waste of time and energy! Have you ever found an answer that satisfies you? It really gets us nowhere, other than to dig us into an even deeper hole than we were in to begin with. I really want to tell people to stop asking “why?” It doesn’t help; there is no answer; focus your energy on dealing with whatever bothers you; love people you need to love; try to keep loving God, because one thing is sure, God is still loving you!

Here are the two most common answers to “why?” The first is to blame God; it is all God’s fault, He has done this, and we become angry with God who we say has done this to us. The second is to blame ourselves and consider that somehow these bad things are a punishment on us for being bad, that somehow God is exercising retribution on us for our past misdemeanours. Neither of these is the Bible’s view of life, the universe and hard times! Jesus’ view of life is that there are times when life is awful and that’s how life is, but He promises to be with us when life is awful! How do I know that? I know and believe that because the same Jesus was crucified, suffered in the most horrendous ways and walked the way of the cross. This is how God is defined in the Bible, by Jesus on a cross, and only later by the power of the resurrection. Don’t leave the cross too early! Jesus is defined by the cross, defined by His suffering, and saves us by the sacrifice of His life. That tells me that when we find that life is hard, He has not walked away from us. He has not done this to us, but He walks with us through dark valleys.

The season of Lent, which we don’t really pay all that much attention to in the protestant churches, is a time for humble reflection. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, is marked in some churches by a mark of ashes on your forehead. Ashes are a sign in the bible of repentance, humbly acknowledging sin. The whole season of Lent is not about giving up chocolate, but is about humble reflection on our faults, as well as on the grace of God. So, when Jesus talks in our story today about the need for repentance, this is a general theme, a way of life, rather than a response to a particular situation. Repentance is a need, a way of life, for everyone, not just for some and that was Jesus’ issue with the Jews because they saw no need for repentance; after all, they were God’s children but for Jesus were fruitless fig trees!

This little episode tells two stories that we know nothing about from elsewhere. “*Now there...*” (Luke 13:1) We have no idea when this happened, but it must have happened in Jerusalem if sacrifices were involved. Indeed, it must have happened in the temple when some people from Galilee were visiting Jerusalem for some religious festival. Think of Jesus’ visit to the city when He was 12 and you get the idea! What we do know is that an event like this fitted with what we know of Pilate; we know that he was a vicious governor, taken to these violent atrocities and so an event like this is totally in character with what we know of him. But the presumption is, amongst some, that these people from Galilee must have bad people for something bad like this to happen to them; they must have deserved it in some divine judgement kind of a way!

There’s another story: “*Or these...*” (Luke 13:4) Again we know nothing of when this accident happened, but again probably in a part of Jerusalem and the tower collapsed and 18 people were killed! We don’t know this story, but we know lots of stories that have happened in our

world in same vein with similar results. Someone told Jesus this story and again the implicit judgement is that these 18 people must have done something bad in their past for this to happen to them; they must have deserved it!

People were going about their business in New Zealand last week, and became victims of someone with guns who wanted to take random lives; 50 people were killed in that violent act. Cyclone Idai hit Mozambique last week, 700 people at least have died in the storm and flood. Jodie Chesney, a victim of knife crime in London at the start of the month, alongside a whole host of other young people, victims together. We could add more and more examples of events and experiences like this and of other kinds too. Did God do this to these people? Absolutely not! Did these people deserve this to happen to them? Absolutely not! The reason these things happen: we live in a broken world and because we live in a broken world, sometimes people do bad things to each other; because we live in a broken world disasters happen that take life. Because we live in a broken world, we are not all perfect people. God is with us in our broken world; He has shared in our broken world, and that takes us back to the cross!

These are such a deep-rooted attitudes that one sermon won't change them, I suspect, but God is not to blame and we are not to blame. The Bible has a quite simple view: "life is awful at times" and that's it! Life is awful; God is with us everywhere we go! So why "repentance"? Surely repentance suggests we have done something wrong and need to change? *"Unless you..." (Luke 13:5)* This is a big picture idea: there will come a time for judgement, a time when the fig tree will be dug up, when God will judge the world and the way in which we have behaved. The way to escape that judgement – is repentance. For Jesus repentance is not just about changing from doing bad things, it is a whole way of life, it is a demeanour. It is about being humble and recognising that our life is out of kilter at times; it about seeing that we live in a broken world and turning to God for help. It is about seeing ourselves as broken and turning to Jesus for salvation, forgiveness and grace. Repentance is the proper response to our broken world and to our part in that broken world, to lives that are less than perfect.

I want to show you a banquet! This is a banquet even better than Irene Shepherd's lunch! Did you ever enjoy a banquet? Have you ever been invited to a banquet? Who invited you? Why? Here's the banquet to which God invites us! *"Come all..." (Isaiah 55:1f)* This banquet is made of the richest of fare, there is nothing second rate about this banquet! The table is groaning under the weight of all that is on it and it is all yours! Here is food and drink in abundance and you are invited! But you say, "I don't deserve an invitation – I can't come!" What? Really? How ungrateful does that sound to the host of this banquet. You're invited to come and enjoy this whole banquet and you don't need money; it is all completely free! We say, "no such thing as a free lunch; there must be a catch!" Cynicism rules OK! This is the picture that the prophet Isaiah paints of the way in which God deals with His people. This is the way in which God has graced His people. Yes, we don't deserve this kind of blessing, but God has invited us; God gives it to us anyway. This is love with which God has loved us.

If the banquet is the picture, here is the reality: *"I will..." (Isaiah 55:3)* There are two ideas that go hand-in-hand here. *"An everlasting covenant"* tells us that God is committed to us; a covenant is a promise plus! God makes promises that He will keep; when God makes a covenant it is for keeps, a commitment, unbreakable. God has made covenants with His people all through the story, and the last and latest is the new covenant He made with us in Jesus, words that we repeat every time we have a communion service – "This is the new covenant in my blood". God has committed Himself to us and to our salvation, to our well-being. The second idea comes from the first: *"my faithful love"*. God loves us with faithfulness; He keeps loving us; He always loves us; He understands when life is hard for us and doesn't

blame us when we struggle; He keeps loving us with a love that is new every day. This is the banquet at which we feast, God's commitment to love us and His faithfulness to work that covenant!

"Seek the..." (Isaiah 55:6) Here is our response to the banquet! See how God has loved us; so seek the Lord and His love. If that means a spirit of repentance, then so be it! That humble spirit is no bad thing in our relationship with God: we live in a broken world; we are broken people; so we seek the Lord with humility in our hearts, with faith, with love for the Lord who has loved us. To seek the Lord, we pray; we confess our faults, we bring our weaknesses and needs; to seek the Lord, we read the Bible and listen for what the Spirit would say to us in what we read; to seek the Lord, we come to worship and listen for God's word preached, prayed, and sung!

Do we always get what we deserve in life? No, of course not! Having to face hard things is not a punishment because we've been bad; we don't deserve to suffer; this is not God getting His own back! Life is just like that at times! We don't deserve the banquet either: but God gives grace, and endless, faithful love in abundance; we see that most in Jesus on the cross, where He shares in our suffering that we may share in His grace and in His glory. God gives us far more than we will ever deserve; why? because He is committed to us; because He loves us; because Jesus has died and is raised. *"Come all..." (Isaiah 55:1)*