

Lent 3C 23 March 2025 Mornington

God of the Second chance

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

When I was *'Sixteen going on Seventeen'*, *'The Sound of Music'* was a big hit at the movies and we all knew the songs by heart.

This week's Gospel has reminded me of another lyric from that show.

"Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good."

If you're a fan of the Sound of Music you'll recognise where it comes from.

Maria's life has taken an unexpected turn. Baron Von Trapp has proposed to her and she's over the moon with happiness. Why has this happened? Because, she believes *"Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good"*.

The belief that we get what we deserve, and that we deserve what we get,

is very widespread. Of course there is some sense in it.

If we love other people, some of them will probably love us back.

But we can sometimes get it badly wrong when we try to make a link between

people's behaviour and the things that happen to them.

I expect we all know good people to whom terrible things have happened,

and times great evil seems to have gone completely unpunished.

It's easy to agonise when things go wrong in our lives –

"What did I do to deserve this?" we say. If we can't think of anything to blame

ourselves for, we blame God.

God hasn't obeyed the rules – God's allowed us to suffer, when we've done nothing to deserve it!

In today's Gospel, Jesus meets a group of people who believe that you get what you deserve and you deserve what you get.

There've been two big disasters in the area recently.

Pilate's troops have massacred a group of Galileans while they were praying in the Temple at Jerusalem, and there has also been a terrible accident.

A tower has collapsed at Siloam, killing eighteen people.

Why?

Had the victims sinned in some way?

"Somewhere in their youth and childhood" had they done something bad?

The crowd expect Jesus to answer *"yes"*.

Then as now, this belief was widespread. Its roots ran deep, like a weed.

Surely, health, wealth, and security were signs of God's blessing; disease and disaster a sign of his anger.

But Jesus doesn't agree with this thinking.

Did these people deserve their fate, he asks?

'No', he says, they didn't, they were no worse than anyone else.

Two thousand years later, we still can't seem to give up the idea that there is some hidden link between sin and disaster, virtue and success. Rogers and Hammerstein wrote it into *The Sound of Music*, and many people continue to believe it.

Perhaps it's part of our human desire to understand the world, to make connections and figure things out.

We want to find predictable patterns so that we know what's coming and can prepare for it.

Maybe we can even control it.

That's fine when we get it right, but sometimes our need to predict and control leads us to see links where there aren't any. We get into superstitious behaviour.

Maybe we have a particular 'lucky' piece of jewellery we can't do without.

Maybe the one time I forget to say '*goodbye - I love you*' to John something terrible will happen to him.

Conspiracy theorists love to spin webs of connection between unrelated events, convinced that there is a secret plot to be discovered.

An obvious example would be those who still ask many many years later "*Why did Princess Diana die, just when she was so happy?*"

Was it a cynical assassination? "Instead of looking at the obvious causes of that tragic fatal crash – a deadly combination of speed, distraction, tiredness, and possibly, too much alcohol.

As long as we have a neat answer, an answer that works for us, it doesn't seem to matter whether it's true or not, but as we know only too well in recent times, disasters don't discriminate. Good people as well as bad die in any disaster.

This sort of superstitious attitude can easily creep into religion too. If only we can say the right prayers, work out what makes God angry and avoid doing it, we can keep God on our side, and persuade God to do what we want, for health, wealth and success in this life, and a ticket to heaven when we die.

So where does that leave us?

Doesn't it matter what we do, how we live?

Is that what Jesus is saying?

No, not at all. In fact he warns his hearers that unless they repent they will perish just as these others have done.

It sounds like a rather mixed message, and it isn't easy to untangle what he means, but here's my attempt.

The word "repent" literally means "think again", change your mind".

"Change your mind", "Change your attitude", says Jesus, or you will die just as they did.

And how did they die?

They died believing that it was their fault. They died believing that they were being punished; that they'd got it wrong, and that God didn't love them.

"Change your mind" says Jesus.

"Change your mind about God and about what God is doing in your lives.

Change your mind about the way God works or

how God feels about you", or you will die believing the same thing,

and what a tragedy that would be.

As Isaiah reminds us:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord".

To push his point home Jesus tells a story.

It's a story about a man who owns a fig tree that won't bear fruit.

So the owner says to his gardener: *'For three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig-tree, and I haven't found any.*

Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?

It's just a waste of space.'

The fig tree has failed to live up to his expectations. It makes no sense to keep it.

But the gardener, rather bravely, considering he is 'just' a servant, takes a risk and

answers his master back. 'No', he says, "*leave it a while. Let's wait another year before we cut it down. It may still come to life and bear fruit. Let me dig around it and manure it, and then we'll see*".

Which of the men in this story would Jesus' hearers assume represented God?

Probably the one with the power, the demanding, exacting owner, judging his fig tree and finding it wanting, punishing it with death. But it isn't the owner who represents God in this story.

It's the gardener, says Jesus.

It's the gardener who is not only patient and generous, he also knows how to help this unfruitful fig, and give it what it needs to thrive.

"Let me dig around the roots and cut them back," he says.

It's good advice.

Apparently, Fig trees fruit better if their roots are restricted or pruned. Allow them a long root run and all they'll produce is leaves. "*Then, says the wise gardener: give it some manure. Feed it and nurture it.*

*Give it another chance and tend it lovingly,
and who knows, we may yet be eating its fruit a year from now. "*

God is not a fearsome judge, waiting to catch us out,
always ready to punish if we fail on our side of some terrifying
bargain.

Instead God is the patient gardener, who sees every day as a new
chance, whatever we may have done in *'our youth or childhood.'*
Every day we are given another chance to grow and thrive in his care.

So often people expect God to tell them that they are not good enough:
that they deserve what they get and they get what they deserve,
and it's no good complaining about it.

Instead, Jesus tells us of a God who longs to heal and nurture.

It is we, who are often the unreasonable judges,
quick to condemn ourselves and condemn others too.

Isaiah has the same good news about God. *"Come buy wine and milk
without price"* says God.

"Return to the Lord ... for he will abundantly pardon".

Wouldn't we all love to know why suffering happens?

I'd love to find a way of avoiding it. I'd love to have a magic wand, to
wave,

an infallible remedy for the pain that I see around me.

But the truth is that we don't know why things turn out as they do,
and there is no magic wand.

What I am convinced of is that it is not the case that we get what we deserve, or that we deserve what we get.

Jesus suffered the cross, and he didn't deserve that.

But as he went through the darkness of death,

he knew that God was with him still;

that this shameful fate was not a sign of rejection, or a sign that he had failed,

but a way to life and peace.

It doesn't matter what we did 'somewhere in our youth or childhood', whether it was good or bad, he tells us.

Instead hear God's call to you to come, now, just as you are,

to eat and drink of his goodness, to grow and thrive in his loving care.

Amen

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