

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 28 February 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr David Gill
Lent 3C - Moments of Crisis, Moments of Grace
Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Back in the days when we all read newspapers instead of computer screens, we could look forward to our daily diet of comic strips. My favourite was "*Peanuts*". Remember "*Peanuts*"? It featured Charlie Brown, who was one of life's victims; his friend Lucy, one of life's irritants; and their dog Snoopy, who was one of life's wise commentators.

In one particular strip, Snoopy's doghouse had burned to the ground. It was a great disaster. He'd lost everything - his record collection, his pool table, even his Van Gogh painting, all gone. We see Snoopy sitting there, contemplating the ruins, when Lucy turns up and decides to give him religion.

"*You know why your doghouse burned?*" she says. "*Because you sinned, that's why*". Snoopy considers that proposition for a moment, then sticks out his tongue and says "*Blah!*" In the last frame we see him with a thought bubble which reads: "*Her kind deserves to be blah-ed*".

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm with Snoopy on that one. Shonky religion does deserve to be blah-ed. And there's an awful lot of that kind of religion around right now.

It seems to get airplay whenever disaster strikes. A major disaster, and within hours someone, somewhere, is sure to say that God is punishing the victims. Exactly what God might be punishing the victims for varies, of course, according to the speaker's prejudices.

Take Japan. In 2011, after its tragic tsunami and the meltdown of Fukushima's nuclear power plant, the governor of Tokyo announced that it was "*divine punishment*" for people's greed. Pakistan's 2002 earthquake had Osama bin Laden claiming that Allah was punishing that country for Pakistan's support of the US-led war on terror. South East Asia's terrible tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 was, according to the former chief rabbi of Israel, God's retribution on those who were trying to get his country to withdraw its troops from Gaza.

Then there was the Christchurch earthquake. Within hours of that tragedy, a website based in Utah had announced that God was giving the Kiwis their comeuppance because of - you'll love this one - because of "*lesbians running loose on the south island as if they own the place*".

Snoopy would have known what to do with that!

We hear such statements and we cringe. We really cringe! We cringe because life is not that simple. We cringe because it's wrong to exploit someone's suffering to promote an agenda of your own. We cringe because there's something deep in the biblical faith that warns against wanting to know more than we mortals ever can.

Leaders of the early church knew that danger. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century theologian, wrote “*Let him who would pry into the mind of God, remember how little he knows of the mystery of the mind of an ant*”. A generation later, St Augustine offered what would become a much-quoted saying: “*If you think you understand, then it’s not God you’re talking about!*” That’s a warning, incidentally, that should give pause to our secularist friends when they ridicule faith, just as much as to our fundamentalist buddies when they imagine they are upholding it.

It’s not just the prattle about divine punishment. The same easy logic is used in reverse. Sometimes you hear people crediting their worldly success to God’s blessing. In a number of Pentecostal churches, particularly the mega-churches now doing a roaring trade, there are preachers proclaiming a so-called “*prosperity gospel*”. Give your life to the Lord, goes their message, and everything thereafter will be beer and skittles. The believer will thrive. The family that prays together will stay together. The nation that obeys God will see its economy flourish and its army triumph.

The direct linkage of obedience and blessing is not only simplistic. It’s politically loaded. The rich are rich because they are pleasing to God. The poor are poor because they’re not. The affluence of the former, therefore, should be protected and reinforced. The poverty of the latter is their own fault and nobody else’s problem. Theologically this is dangerous nonsense, but it does provide a comfortable religious home for some who find themselves on the far right of politics.

Now, we must admit there are parts of the Bible that think this way. In the book of Proverbs, for example, and some of the psalms, we find Biblical writers assuming a direct connection between obeying God and flourishing, disobeying God and suffering. In fact, this morning’s Epistle, St Paul came perilously close to making that direct connection.

But elsewhere we find a more nuanced, a more mature understanding. Some prophetic writings and some psalms – and St Paul, elsewhere - express honest perplexity about life’s dramas. There is the anguished heart-searching of the book of Job. So profound! There is the life story of Jesus himself. In terms of earthly rewards, he was a loser. Worldly power? Prosperity? An easy life? Hardly. His cross stands as the ultimate repudiation of all simplistic notions of reward and punishment.

No surprise then that this morning’s gospel has Jesus rejecting that approach. He refers to two recent tragedies that were in people’s minds: some Jews who had been slaughtered by the Romans while offering sacrifices in Jerusalem, and 18 people crushed when a tower collapsed in Siloam. Were the victims being punished by God? No, says Jesus. Do not think that way.

At another time, in another place, people had asked him “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” Neither, Jesus told them. That’s not how it works.

But back to this morning’s passage. Jesus doesn’t only correct some shonky religion. He goes further. He shifts the conversation.

Enough about those people in Jerusalem and Siloam, he says. You’re being distracted by the wrong question. Don’t waste time pointing at the lives of others and trying to connect the dots. What about *you*? What matters is not why something might have happened to someone else. The important question is: what in *your life* may need turning around?

Then, to dramatize that question, he cites the very tragedies they'd been discussing. Set in Jerusalem, at Siloam - that's life, he seems to be saying. Tragedies do occur. Heartbreaks happen. But these things should press us to see more clearly what life is for, to review more energetically what our priorities may be, to direct more resolutely where our lives should be headed.

Of course, it's only human to seek meaning when things fall apart. When South-East Asia's terrible tsunami struck, twelve years ago, I happened to be serving a church in Hong Kong. For weeks the phone didn't stop. People who'd never been inside a church before kept coming in to our building, wanting to talk to the pastor - talk to anyone - seeking answers. Muslim friends in Indonesia emailed me "*Where is Allah in all this?*" Even my favourite water hole provided no refuge, as the bar staff sidled up to me with the question: "*David, you work for the church don't you? What do you think about all those poor people ...?*"

It's natural. Be it a mega-tragedy involving millions or a micro-tragedy involving your life alone, it's natural you try to solve the riddle. You want to fill the silence. You yearn to make sense of the madness.

But Jesus says to us: no, that's the wrong question. Don't get stuck trying to answer the unanswerable. Rather, seize on such moments of crisis, which come to all of us. Seize on these moments so that they may become moments of growth, even moments of blessing.

Now that is a big ask.

When I was a kid my father would sometimes irritate me beyond words with his response to the various disasters of my childhood. Whether I'd fallen off a bike, failed an exam or come off second best in a fight, he would tell me: "*David, this is an important learning experience*" - or words to that effect. It was never what I wanted to hear, of course, but he was right.

That holds true not only for the dramas of childhood but for the tragedies and heartbreaks of adulthood as well. They too can be occasions for growth, even moments of grace. *If we manage to deal with them in the right way.*

If!

Some - indeed many - do manage to approach things that way. I am constantly amazed by people who have passed through terrible experiences and emerged not broken, not bitter, scarred yes, but somehow enriched. Those who have stared hell in the face, yet still are able to smile. With a joy that comes, not from the surface, but from deep, deep down.

I guess the writer Christine Caine was thinking of such people when she wrote: "*Sometimes when you're in a dark place you think you've been buried, but actually you've been planted*".

Speaking of things planted; do you remember how this morning's gospel finished? With a fig tree and an extravagant gardener, who wanted to waste yet more energy on a tree that wasn't showing any sign of bearing fruit. That thing is useless, said the owner. Chop it down. No! No, no, no the gardener insisted, I want to work on it.

Lent is a very good time to let the divine gardener do some work on our lives too. We can help by clearing away some of the rubbish.

Don't, don't, surround yourself with the clutter of unanswerable questions and crushing regrets. Cast away those broken pieces of yesterday. Life is too short.

We are not here to explain the inexplicable. We're not here to fret over what is past. We're not here to dwell on what might have been – if things had turned out differently.

We're here to revel in the ever-present mystery of **grace**.

For life is not about loving answers. It's about loving God and other people.

Or better, it is about discovering that we are ourselves loved – undeservedly, unconditionally, extravagantly, and without limit.

It's about drawing the consequences of that amazing grace, the liberating consequences, for ourselves and for our world.

Let's go to it.