

Sermon preached at OCC, 23 March 2025

*Through God's Word, O Holy Spirit, bring us closer to our Saviour. Open our eyes to see and ears to hear the truth in scripture so that we are no longer barren but a fruitful tree that offers you the fruits of repentance and salvation. In the strong name of Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Luke 13:1-9

### *A 180-Degree Turn*

Under the title of *Repent or Perish*, the reading begins with a grisly massacre done by Pilate at the Temple and a parable of a barren fig tree for three years. For both, things happened unexpectedly. Again, for both, repentance is required. We may ask where we are in these stories and what repentance means. We'll think about it one by one.

### ***When bad things happen to unsuspecting people***

When we say bad things happen to good people, the assumption is that we live in a universe of rewards and punishments. A long time ago, I read a book titled, "*When bad things happen to good people*," written by a Jewish rabbi, Harold Kushner. When his son was diagnosed with a degenerative disease that meant the boy would only live until his early teens, Harold Kushner was faced with one of life's most difficult contemplation of the doubts and fears that arise when tragedy strikes. But how do we define 'good' or 'bad' people? Jesus said, no one is good but God alone.<sup>1</sup> So, Christianly speaking, bad things can happen to unsuspecting people, such as people in Ukraine, people affected by floods or earthquakes, terminally ill patients and so on. One of the well-known examples in scripture is in the book of Job, who suffered severe losses and carried on an extended verbal interchange with three friends.<sup>2</sup> The story of Job famously coined a phrase like *Job's Comforters*. Yet his friends condemn him for his wrongdoings, which are hidden from human eyes but known to God. Against them, Job claims that he is innocent. However, as many people may think, Job's suffering is not the main focus. The book does not comprehensively explain why suffering and pain exist in the world. Instead, it is about who God is and what God is doing in the world. Similarly, Jesus didn't pay much attention to their tragedies or condemn Pilate's cruelty. Instead, he focused on repentance - if they didn't want to perish like them, they should repent. For those who died unexpectedly, the word 'repent'

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:19 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

<sup>2</sup> Job 3:28

seems very harsh as there was no time to repent for them. Then Jesus told the parable of the barren fig tree.

### ***When good things happen to a fruitless tree***

The parable speaks about a fig tree that is facing imminent judgment. A similar image of cutting down unfruitful trees is used by John the Baptist. But in that case, the focus was on ‘good’ fruits, not barrenness.<sup>3</sup> The parable supports Jesus’ emphasis on ‘repentance’, which is the condition of life, not death. It also warns against false reassurance while forgetting its fruitless life. The fig tree has been cultivated so far, but it wasn’t productive yet. Unless it begins to bear fruit, it will be cut down in the end. Repentance is also a condition for bearing good fruits. In Luke 3:8, John the Baptist says to the crowds that come out to be baptised by him, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” Now, what is repentance, then?

### ***The word - repentance***

With the word ‘sin’, repentance becomes less popular in our faith conversation. We’d like to hear or talk about love, grace, forgiveness - something beautiful and inclusive words while avoiding words like sin, punishment, or repentance. It is partly because we use these words based on their meaning in English. The word repentance – *metanoia*,<sup>4</sup> however, is not about moral uprightness, expressions of regret, or a 180-degree turnaround. Rather, here and in many other places in the Bible, it refers to a changed mind, a new way of seeing things and being persuaded to adopt a different perspective.

In Luke-Acts, “repentance” also has moral applications,<sup>5</sup> but it cannot be reduced to a re-engineered life and ethics. Sometimes, it is presented as something given or accomplished by God,<sup>6</sup> or it is about being found than about finding oneself.<sup>7</sup> It refers to an entirely reoriented self, a new consciousness of one’s shortcomings and dire circumstances. Of course, this has

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:9

<sup>4</sup> μετάνοια, ας, ἡ metanoia change of direction, conversion, repentance

<sup>5</sup> Concerning forgiveness, e.g. Luke 24:47

<sup>6</sup> Acts 5:31; 11:18

<sup>7</sup> Luke 15:1-10

moral consequences<sup>8</sup> regarding fruit and deeds consistent with repentance. But it's more than morality. When Jesus said to them, 'repent,' the urgency is here. Tragedy and hardship have their ways of nudging people toward God; they may come so suddenly that they often mark the end of one's life, leaving them with no time to repent.

### ***Repent or Perish?***

Jesus' words about judgment and repentance are scary. But in general, scripture portrays human life as a gift, albeit fragile. In the season of Lent, too many Lenten observances only focus on expressions of piety from the human side. However, the Christian outlook on repentance moves toward restoring the relationship with God. That is, it tells us – Jesus' followers directly as the fig tree wasn't wild and sprouted up but planted by the owner and tended by the gardener in the garden. It's a great privilege to hear God's word in church. But if we don't respond to the message of God's grace, it is also disastrous. They are just using up ground that otherwise could be fruitful. They are not only endangering their own souls but harming others as well.

At some stage, the apostle Paul said, "Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."<sup>9</sup> Those who do not take the opportunity offered to repent can lose out in the end. As the gardener puts it to the landowner, it will be cut down if the fig tree does not bear fruit in another year. So, what does it mean to us today?

In our story time, we heard the story of the barren tree. We had a role play by being one of the characters in the story by asking, "How did the owner/gardener/barren tree feel?" The owner may have been frustrated because the tree didn't bring them any profit. The gardener, too, was sad as he seemed to tend the tree with diligence and efforts. For the tree, it might have been dreadful initially, but then relieved with gratitude. But any gardener or farmer would know that good soil affects the overall condition of a tree and its fruits. Then it leaves us with these questions: who is repentant in this reading? Despite the diligence, the gardener seems to repent by changing the nurturing methods to be more adaptable to the tree. Also, those who reported Pilate's cruelty are required to repent by not simply reporting the other's fault and cruelty but

---

<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20

<sup>9</sup> Romans 2:4-5

by living the godly life actively despite such violence. In this Lenten period, where are we in the parable of a fig tree, and what is our repentance to reconfigure the order of faith in God? May God help us - Amen.