

Lent 3 St Mungo's March 20th, 2022

'Changing direction'

Text from today's gospel (Lk 13 v 1-9)

: v 5b 'unless you repent, you will likewise perish'

The above theme "Changing Direction" fits easily into the general mood of Lent and with the words of Jesus in our Gospel for today. Lent is and always has been about repentance and repentance is and always has been about looking critically at the direction of our lives and contemplating a fundamental change that brings us closer to The Way- Jesus' way. Our aspirations in Lent are always has been a deeply personal matter, one of commitment. But if we are honest, could any of us look back at a particular year and say –"Are yes, Lent 1951, (or 2000 or 2021) was the year I changed direction? I suspect your answer, like mine, would be 'No', for which there are two main reasons:

1. We don't see anything seriously wrong with our current trajectory- we are basically 'good' people, our hearts are in the right place, etc.
2. Our church doesn't think she or we have to change radically for similar reasons. Lent is just one of many seasons the good and faithful observe: we move on, complete the cycle and muddle through until next Lent.

We only have to look at the continuing absence of young families and children in our church to know that a change of direction is urgently needed to avoid our eventual disappearance from the community map. [With that in mind we sang a hymn, which was all about change and saying 'Yes' to God: 'Among us and before us you stand'; NHWS 11.

The text you might expect to be one chosen by a bible- thumping evangelist in the Deep South of the USA rather than a Progressive Christian from the SEC like me but it hits three right notes:

- it gets to the heart of Lent;
- it gets to the meat of today's Gospel;
- it speaks helpfully to us at a time of international crisis.

On this last point, the language is so strident that it seems to paraphrase President Putin's ultimatum to the people of Ukraine. Why on earth does Jesus appear to be using words that come today from the lips of a ruthless, heartless dictator? Note that I said 'appears to be using words---'. We mislead ourselves if we treat Luke's gospel as though he quotes someone's shorthand notes as he automatically translated of every word as they came from Jesus' mouth into English. Luke has used his own Greek words to dramatise stories in Aramaic and re-circulating 30 or so years after Jesus told them.

The second thing to note is the context, which is so, so relevant to us right now. People had come to ask Jesus a fundamental question that has always bugged mankind about human tragedies: WHY?

Why did apparently innocent people lose their lives in deliberate state violence, like when governor Pilate authorized the massacre of local Gallileans, engaged, in an unthreatening, sacrificial religious ritual. And why did apparently innocent people die in random accidents, like when a tower, probably part of the city walls, collapsed. The unspoken reasoning was that the victims were not as innocent as they seemed: their sins had caught up with them and their fate was just. By default, Jesus' questioners were assuming the moral high ground, for they –as survivors- must be relatively sin free.

Luke attaches a sense of urgency to such questions by prefacing them with 'At that very time----'. He did it again in last week's gospel from same chapter, when Pharisees offered some advice to Jesus (v31). The questions raised by sudden deaths of innocent people were in the forefront of people's thinking about God. Why did He allow such tragedies to happen, even sanction them? It's the question many are asking over tragic loss of lives and livelihoods in Ukraine.

There is an interesting take on this passage on the current 'JourneywithJesus' website page, suggesting that "Why" is the wrong question to ask. We should adopt the Buddhist practice of 'mu': of 'unasking' questions that are unanswerable. Instead, we grope around for non-answers: 'it could be worse'; 'it will all turn out for the best'; 'they are now at rest'. The Jesus way was to unask the question: stop thinking your survival is any reflection on your current 'goodness' and repent; change the direction of you lives.

This Lent, I suggest that instead of tinkering with our religiosity at the edges because we see nothing wrong with our broad direction of travel and, instead, contemplate a major change- not a U-turn, more a 90° change - towards a 'horizontal' rather than a 'vertical' faith. I came across the terms in Diana Butler Bass's book 'Grounded', a follow-up to her 'Christianity After Religion', which warned of the dire prospects for an unchanged and unchanging church. 'What is the difference between 'Vertical' and 'Horizontal' faith?' you may well be asking.

Vertical faith sees God as a detached, supernatural power to be kept happy by worship and obeisance on the off chance that nasty happenings, down here on earth, might be averted or mitigated.

Horizontal faith, by contrast, sees God as an intrinsic part of life, in all its forms, here on earth; as a compassionate force within every human being human being, waiting to be allowed to transform the bad to the good.

In reality, we need a mixture of the two. If we superimpose the vertical on the horizontal, we get the form of a cross, an 'I' crossed out, the way Jesus lived and died. However, we have been brought up on a religious diet of 'vertical' hymns, vertical prayers and vertical interpretation of scripture, so ours is a predominantly vertical faith. We need a 90° turn to get a fuller picture of the divine.

The question 'Why' is a vertical question; in asking it, we detach ourselves from the suffering and absolve ourselves from responsibility for it. A Horizontal faith accepts what is and asks different questions: how can I ease suffering; can I change my life so that there is less suffering; can I do more to oppose those who instigate or condone suffering? Jesus walked this earth as an exponent of horizontal faith: he reached out in compassion to the poor, the sick and the downtrodden. (At this point, I paused for 'Jesus Christ Is Waiting, Waiting in The Streets' to be sung)

After the urge to repent, Jesus told the parable of the fig tree. By teaching in parables like this one, Jesus allegorises a horizontal faith. He draws lessons from the natural surroundings. He rarely explained his parables, even to the disciples, but the gospel writers may sometimes have felt obliged to fill in the gaps. To attach names to characters and features of parables is the habit of a vertical faith and risks narrowing the implications in ways Jesus never intended. In this parable of the fig tree, the vertically oriented immediately see God as the vineyard owner, Jesus as the vinedresser and ourselves as the soil requiring cultivation, particularly in Lent. The horizontally inclined might view themselves as an absentee landlord, only occasionally interested in the fruitfulness of the earth at harvest time: or as the vinedresser, with opportunities to remove fruitless parts of our lives.

Whereas the gospel opened ominously with an ultimatum, it ends open to all possibilities. The vinedresser puts in a plea to give the tree another season in which to cultivate and feed the soil, which may be the factor limiting fruitfulness. We are not told whether he makes the effort or whether it succeeds: both outcomes remain possible. And that's where we stand as penitents on this 3rd Sunday in Lent, challenged to change direction, towards the horizontal; towards refreshed horizons; towards the cross.

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