

Luke's gospel, set in events two thousand years ago, is uncannily pertinent to these our own turbulent and disturbing times. It is almost too close for comfort and in fact it is arguably not that comforting at all.

We are left today with more questions than answers, left to ponder very difficult things in our hearts, to reconcile who we are as Christians with where we are at in our history. In fact we are in pretty much the same predicament as the disciples in Luke's gospel. They are agitated and unnerved, angry and grief-stricken. They are likely hoping Christ has easy answers or at least words of comfort. He doesn't. Yes he has answers and yes he has words in response to their desperation but the answers are anything but easy and the words are more challenging than comforting.

The disciples are angry and worried about recent events in Judaea. First there had been an unprovoked massacre of innocent Galilean men and women, like themselves, who were simply out and about offering their traditional sacrifice to God. As if that was not devastating enough here had been a dreadful accident in which an apparently strong tall building had collapsed. Many people had died and a lot more were injured.

So think Ukraine and think Covid pandemic and it is not hard to identify with Christ's audience. They are overwhelmed by outrage, anger, grief, dread, doubt and fear. So many of their compatriots and friends are needlessly dead or injured, their lives suddenly, violently interrupted by unforeseen events. The weight of sorrow must have been unbearable. We can easily understand that. There is a tsunami of sorrow for Ukraine, a torrent of condemnation of Russia but the suffering goes on. And this week in a special way we called back to memory all those we loved who died in hospitals all over Ireland during the Covid pandemic. They died with distressed families behind screens and walls unable to hold a hand or say a word of consolation, they were buried with friends and families unable to sit together in church, or walk together behind a coffin. We have known too many days of such misery. This gospel story is our story too.

The distraught disciples perhaps mercifully do not then know that things are set to get a lot worse for Christ's own passion and death are yet to come and he knows that. He knows he will be tried and crucified by a man called Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judaea whose name will resonate throughout Christendom repeated over and over again billions of times in the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed so much so that his name will become almost as famous as the name of the crucified Jesus. We will learn of him as a man in a powerful political position who was weakened by his encounter with Christ, who could find no evidence against him, who symbolically washed his hands of the conviction, who over time in some Christian narratives is characterised as a convert to Christianity who died a martyr.

But today Luke gives us a shocking factual insight into Pilate's background and there is no mistaking what he is. Pilate is a tyrant. A mass murderer. An oppressive foreign imperial ruler who not only perversely slaughters an innocent colonised people but who takes a callous pleasure in it. He mixes the blood of those Galileans he kills with their sacrifices. And although this particular story only appears in Luke's gospel, it seems Pilate had a deserved reputation as a despot, a reality Christ would have been very well aware of.

The disciples are brimming with indignation at the injustice of Pilate's latest act of tyranny and the unfairness of random accidents. They look to Christ for vindication, for reassurance, for answers. Yet in the story as Luke tells it, Christ does not match their outrage or soothe their sense of grievance. Instead he challenges his listeners in terms that are anything but soothing, you could say they are even scathing. He warns them that there is no law of God or nature that gives them special protection from being murdered by a scoundrel or from an accidental death. So instead of lamenting their misfortune and victimhood at the hands of others they need, as a priority, to look to their own lives, to repent, to be ready for the judgment that is coming to one and all sooner or later be they bullies or victims.

Jesus had by then been preaching his message of repentance, salvation and resurrection for three years. It seemed to him that it was going in one ear and out the other. The fruitless fig tree may well have been a metaphor for the worrying lack of success of his ministry. That part of the parable seems to say that even a patient God can lose patience but then the wise and experienced gardener pleads successfully for the tree to be given one more chance and, perhaps a tad reluctantly, it is. The message seems to be that we are all living on borrowed time.

How much more patient can our God be with a world that is carelessly at best cynically at worse, destroying the divine gift of a magnificent planet which has all the resources it needs to nourish its people and nurture its environment. We have had all the time in the world to nurture this planet and humanity to peace and to perfection. How much more patient can our God be when the many lessons of the dehumanising effects of violence and war are lost to a new generation and Europe's hard won peace is threatened by another World War this time with weapons too barbaric to contemplate?

When we plead and pray in our horror and helplessness, just like the disciples in their day in similar circumstances, the voice of Jesus is here in Luke's gospel reminding us that there will be a day of accountability for the trees that do not bear fruit, for those who claim to be Christian but fail to hear the call to humbly change behaviour, to build a culture of decency, of love of neighbour. And yet as quickly as lies and hatred convulse our world and fill us with dread, precisely as the worst of the human condition reveals its capacity for deliberate and accidental harm- into that desolate landscape of fruitless trees, the very best of humanity pushes up the green shoots that buy us time. Scientists work around the clock to find vaccines, front line workers exhaust themselves in care for the sick and dying, shops, homes, communities, churches reorganise around the pandemic inventing a whole new culture of mutuality, and today doors open to refugees, vans are packed with food and clothes and driven across the continent to help strangers, helpless bystanders at an evil war fund-raise, protest, organise, drawing up bucketfuls of resilience, endurance and love from wells some thought had run dry. But far from it- as the wise gardener knew all along.

There is no mystery about what Christ demands of us, the change of heart and action he insists on. It is not a demand made of just some but of all. There is no place in Christ's teaching for simply back-seat complaining about the bad behaviour of others or the unfairness of life itself. His is a call to action for God has a plan and it is our job to make it work, to create peace on earth, to radically live good will to all, to eradicate evil, find answers to disease and disability—all these things within our power with the help of God. For we are not alone- Corinthians has just told us: God is faithful, and he will not let us be tested beyond our strength but will provide the way out so that we may endure whatever we have to face. And Isaiah's words help us put one foot in front of the other not just in hope, for mere hope in and of itself is not a plan. It has to inspire the action that keeps hope alive, that waters and manures and the soil brings forth the green shoots.

As Isaiah says

“...my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

And that is the plan God has for us, to be, to build- the higher ways.