

## Reflection: The Providence of God; Wrath or Love?

*Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.*

Luke is a masterly story teller. His Gospel is full of passages that throw light on the meaning of other passages in the same narrative. Is this an exception? At first sight the first five verses of today's Gospel, using long forgotten events in Galilee and Siloam to call us all to repent, bear little relation to the parable of the fig tree. Or are we missing something? I believe that when taken together they give an insight into what is sometimes called the Providence of God and our own human distortion of its true meaning. Jesus dismisses the notion that the angry vengeance of God is found in Galilee and Siloam. This is juxtaposed with God's patient loving care for his creation in the parable of the fig tree: classic Luke!

Let us try to put this passage into context. Divine Providence is rooted in the Covenant promises of God to his people; it embraces God's protection and guidance of Israel. This was celebrated by Isaiah in his hymn to the abundance of life: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat". This bountiful generosity is open to all who repent. "Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon". [*Isaiah 55: 1 and 7-8*] "Ho", indeed!

But some of us are obsessed with the wrath of God rather than his Love. Transferring our own anger and condemnation of other people to the Almighty, we sometimes see as part of God's Providence his loss of patience with those who are disobedient or slow to respond to his protection and guidance, leading to his destructive judgement and punishment. This is reflected in St Paul's interpretation of God's vengeance on the people of Israel who idolatrously worshiped the Golden Calf. [*1 Corinthians 10:5*] "God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness", a reference to *Exodus 32:34-35*, "the Lord sent a plague on the people because they made the Calf".

For me this tension comes to a head in the otherwise wonderful modern hymn "In Christ alone my hope is found; he is my light, my strength, my song". I am afraid that I cannot bring myself to sing the words "'Til on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied"; but for its author Stuart Townend, from a Calvinist tradition, that concept of wrath is essential. He has even used copyright laws against churches that have omitted or altered that verse.

I am sure that it was this sort of tension that Jesus was trying to defuse in our Gospel reading. Some bystanders brought up the massacre by the Roman occupiers of a group of Jewish worshipers in

Galilee. From Jesus' response it is pretty clear that the suggestion was being made that they had been punished, something Jesus rebuts; "Were they worse sinners than all other Galileans?" And he drew the parallel with the victims of the collapsed tower of Siloam in Jerusalem. Jesus gave short shrift to any suggestion of punitive justice: "Were they worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Basically his message was that we are **all** sinners. Don't obsess with the perceived sins of others. Look at your own sinfulness and repent of **that**. It is a constant theme: "Let he that is without sin cast the first stone". [John 8:7] "First take the log out of your own eye then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye". [Luke 6:42]

Yet, despite these admonitions, throughout history zealous Christians have continued to attribute the suffering of those with whom they disagree to the wrath of God. This perversion of the understanding of Providence was particularly rampant in England in the early seventeenth century when Protestant polemicists raged against Roman Catholics in the years following the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The historian Alexandra Walsham points to the many tragedies, such as deformed births and freak storms, which were attributed to God's anger against "Papists". The most dramatic example was the so-called "Fatal Vesper" on the eighteenth anniversary of Gunpowder Plot in 1623 when ninety Catholics attending a secret sermon in a house in Blackfriars plunged to their deaths when the floor collapsed. Calvinist mobs roamed London seeking to destroy survivors who had escaped the righteous wrath of God.

It would be good to think that Christians today have moved on from such barbaric superstition; but one of the most memorable examples of belief in providential wrath is within the memory of most of us here today. On 9<sup>th</sup> July 1984 a bolt of lightning struck York Minster causing catastrophic fire damage. This surely must have been an Act of God! Why? An easy answer presented itself. Only three days before that disaster the highly respected but indiscreetly radical theologian, Bishop David Jenkins, to the outrage of conservative Christians, had been consecrated as Bishop of Durham in York Minster. Indeed, in the minds of many the wrath of God was satisfied!

And still we hear how Aids or Covid or uncontrollable forest fires are signs of God's judgement.

So, let return to our passage from Luke: Jesus, having disdained the idea of Providential Wrath and made his call to repentance stresses the bountiful and patient love of God. The gardener intercedes with the landowner not to destroy the failing fig tree but to allow it care and sustenance so that it might flourish. And this is not an isolated parable. In later passages Luke's theme is of rejoicing when the lost are found. The unconditional welcome by the father of the returning Prodigal Son overwhelms the judgemental resentment of the older brother who had done his family duty and

stayed at home. [Luke 15:11-32] The woman spares no effort in her search for the coin that had been lost [Luke 15:8-10]. And my favourite, the parable of the Lost Sheep. [Luke 15:1-7] Our sentimental perception of an innocent woolly lamb detracts from the message that Jesus was trying to convey. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has reminded us, the sheep was a sinner that had strayed. He was probably a smelly, aggressive monster of a ram, constantly looking for a fight, even with the Good Shepherd who saved him.

For me it is Desmond Tutu who best reflects the meaning of this parable of the fig tree and its message that providential love is stronger than wrathful vengeance:

*Goodness is stronger than Evil;*

*Love is stronger than Hate;*

*Light is stronger than Darkness;*

*Life is stronger than Death.*

*Victory is ours through Him who loves us.*

*Amen.*