

SERMON – LENT 3 – 20 MARCH 2022 – Isaiah 55.1-9, Luke 13.1-9



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sadly the world doesn't change. Then, Pilate mixes the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices, one day last week the rulers of Saudi Arabia execute 81 people in a single day. Perhaps some leaders of the people said he shouldn't have done it, or they made vague statements about "raising the question of human rights." 18 people killed when a tower in Siloam collapsed on them, 72 died in the flames of Grenfell Tower. No doubt on both occasions building standards were blamed, everyone tried to pin the blame on someone else, and if the job had been done properly in the first place, lives would not have been lost.

These things happen, have happened, have always happen – and will continue to happen until the end of the world. Sometimes they happen because the people have been stupid, evil, cut corners, done something wrong, etc. etc. – but so often they don't happen because the people caught up in the middle of it are any more sinners than the rest of us, they simply happen.



Chapel of West Suffolk Hospital

As a Chaplain you would get used to the question – why has this happened to me? As I'm sure I've said before, sometimes the answer was obvious – if your son hadn't been driving his new car at 140 mph down the A14 you probably wouldn't be sat here now crying your eyes out and blaming God - and on other occasions there was no reason for it, wrong place, wrong time – some pre-existing medical condition no one knew about – just one of those things.



The suffering of the people of Ukraine, because when the Communist USSR fell – and God knows it needed to fall – when it fell, a few powerful men got their hands on the assets of a failed state, and made a fortune. Many other evil men (usually men) jumped on the bandwagon, consolidated their power, enjoyed their wealth, helped them get richer, gave them more and more power. Then they start a War – and we say how dreadful it is, how they must be stopped – while, of course, giving them plenty of time to get their money and resources out of this country.



Two years ago we were going into Lockdown as the first wave of Covid came towards us – and much of the planning that had gone into preparing for a pandemic seemed to be ignored. At one extreme some men and women laid down their lives for their friends – at the other extreme some men and women got extremely rich and did very nicely out of it. Two years on, clapping on the doorsteps has still not led to a meaningful pay rise for our medics and care workers, the NHS continues to be starved of funding, and it seems as if it is being allowed to fail, so the private sector has to step in, and a minority of people will get very rich indeed. Two years on, we're told it's all over – well, from where I've been lying, feeling pretty grot for the last week, no, it is not over. But it's all a bit much!

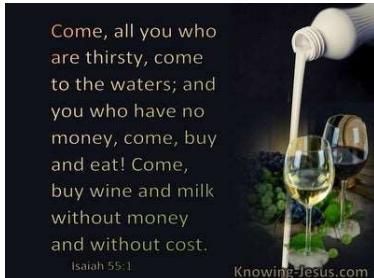


It is no wonder when people just turn off. Turn off the television, ignore the images from Ukraine, give up the protest and the fighting for justice – it's all

hard work, we wonder if we get anywhere, and the evil just seems to spring back in a different form. In Greek myth we have the story of Hydra, the nine headed god, and everything time you cut a head off, another two grow – we understand how the Greeks felt. A real labour of Hercules to try and defeat it – and we haven't got the energy any more.



It's a bit like dealing with the brambles in my garden. There are so many, as soon as you cut some down, you find more. Go out a fortnight later, and you'll wonder why you bothered – there'll be just as many. And elsewhere in the garden we have the Derby equivalent of the fig tree, does it do anything useful? Chop it down, burn it, get rid of it. No, give it some manure, give it a bit of TLC, and who knows what might happen. I love that image – we all need some TLC, a bit of manure, love and concern and care. Thank you to those who have given it to me over the last fortnight – I hope we'll always be a church that cares for each other, and for our community. That's one of the things that God has called us to do. I have been in my garden for long enough now that I can see the difference we have made – keep plugging on.



In Isaiah we have an amazing offer – “everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” You and I – and I can probably generalize – are able to afford what we need. Though I wrote this before finding out my energy bill will be doubling from £104 to £211 a month. OK, perhaps in the past we have had to be more careful, make sure the budget stretches – but I don't think any of us will be going hungry tonight (but please, if you are sitting there thinking “Peter hasn't got a clue what my circumstances are”, do have a quiet word. We can help). I do remember a phone call I got from the daughter of one of our St Edmund's elderly people back at the start of the pandemic – she was stuck in Yorkshire, he was stuck in Derbyshire – she couldn't get an online delivery for him, she was desperate. We were able to help.

A different level of desperation for those in our City who week by week, day by day, struggle to feed their families. There will be many in our churches for whom this prophecy is miles away from what they can afford, what they can manage. We need to accept that, to help with that, to be aware how tough life is – but we must believe in something better, we must work for what is better, we must have vision and belief.



I love the idea that this prophecy is everything that we are not supposed to do - wine, rich food, all the things the doctor tells me not to have – I needn’t feel naughty when I treat myself to a cake from Birds. But the prophecy is not about my desire for cake, it is a prophecy about something much more than that.



It is the belief that God holds us in his love – and that is a reality. You watch the faith of people in Ukraine, the photos of men, women and children, praying, worshipping, finding strength and purpose as they face the powers of evil. They put our faith to shame, and we stand in awe of them. I don’t know whether Richard and Nazanin Zagari-Ratcliffe have a religious faith or not, but I can still see the love and power of God working through them and the many who have loved, supported and prayed for them. After what they have been through, it will be very hard for them to return to a normal family life, so we continue to hold them in our prayers.



There is something amazing that our faith, our covenant with God, is a covenant, a faith that goes back thousands of years. King David was about 1000 BC – so for three thousand years, leaders, the people of God, have believed they have a close relationship with him – and that makes a difference. The story of their King, David, of his battle with Goliath, his love for Jonathan, so many

good – and bad – things, that is a relationship which means so much over the centuries. For us the story of David is not so vital, so alive – but we see our Lord, our Messiah, as following in his steps, being part of that Messianic tradition. We do find ourselves part of a worldwide faith – not actually a faith we are very good at celebrating, but we do need to remember that we are not alone, a couple of struggling churches on the outskirts of Derby, we are part of an incredible worldwide faith which does make a difference to billions of lives.



It is a faith that calls us to “seek the Lord while he may be found” – and he can always be found. It is a faith that challenges us to call out evil, and demand a better, fairer, more just and loving world. I have to believe that God is involved with his people, his world – he demands that we work for his kingdom, and he gives us the strength to do so. He also gives us the joy to keep going, because it is worth it. Somehow I have to have faith in God, I have to believe in something better – I have to know that God is in charge. I do recognize his love, his purpose in so many places – and Easter reminds us that God is there in crucifixion as well as in resurrection. Nothing can separate us from the love of God – and that is the gospel we proclaim.

Peter Barham
18 March 2022