

The Life of an Institution

Repent or Perish

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 24th March 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

When I was in my last job, there was a time when one of the office staff was given the rather tricky task of drawing up a risk assessment for the benefit of our insurers. So she was having to think of every possible risk a cathedral might be running: the possibility of a member of the public going off-piste on a tower tour and having to be airlifted off by helicopter, as actually happened once at Gloucester Cathedral; or the possibility of having to close the cathedral because of demonstrations as happened for several weeks at St. Paul's a few years ago. So this was not a job for anyone with a nervous disposition, having to imagine every conceivable risk that might affect the insurance. And I frivolously remarked that, "Surely the biggest risk might be that there might turn out after all to be no God, in which case the whole church enterprise would be redundant." Overhearing this, the Dean interjected with his tongue only partly in his cheek, saying that, "On the contrary, that if there turned out to be no God, the life of the cathedral would carry on, exactly the same."

It was a reminder that institutions can take on a life of their own. The church was born out of Pentecost and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the first apostles. But the church is also a very human institution, and sometimes there doesn't seem to be anything very divine about it. And as a result people's loyalty can get misdirected: those who start out loving Jesus, can end up loving the church more. And when that happens, the church can become a kind of idol: instead of pointing people towards God, all it seems to point to is its own power. So in both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, the child abuse scandals of recent years have been made even worse by the failure of those in senior positions to deal with the allegations properly: the instinct has

often been to cover up and try and protect the institution, instead of doing what is right and serving the interests of victims and of God's justice.

And in this morning's Gospel reading we see Jesus warning his followers not to assume that serving the interests of their national institutions is the same thing as serving the will of God. First of all he's told about some Galilean pilgrims who were massacred by Roman troops whilst visiting the Temple in Jerusalem, so that their blood polluted the sanctuary; then Jesus mentions a news story about a tower being built on the city wall in Jerusalem which collapsed, killing all the builders. In both cases Jesus says, "Do you think the victims were worse sinners than anyone else? Do you think these events are God's judgment on people who are particularly wicked? Of course not."

God doesn't make bad things happen to bad people, nor does he make good things happen particularly to good people: the rain falls on both the righteous and the unrighteous. So if the circumstances of your life are a bit difficult just now, it isn't because God is judging you: that really isn't how it works. But, Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." So what's that about?

I think what Jesus meant was that his fellow Jews had the wrong idea about what it meant to be the people of God. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is concerned that his people are going about their calling to be the chosen people of God in the wrong way. They're seeing the temple, for example, as a symbol of national resistance to Rome, instead of being purely a place of prayer. They're being tempted to play the Romans at their own game: thinking that the way to be a successful nation is to be independent; to win freedom through force of arms; to drive out the invader and turn the tables on the enemy through violence. And Jesus is saying unless you change your ideas, it isn't just a few Galilean pilgrims in the temple who are going to get hurt, it'll be everybody. And it won't just be the people under the under one tower who get buried on the fallen masonry, the Romans will demolish the entire city if you carry on like this, and you will all still be inside it. And of course that's exactly what happened. In AD70, nearly 40 years after Jesus's death, the Jewish people rebelled against Rome, the legions came and laid siege to Jerusalem and they totally destroyed it, killing everyone they could find.

And so Jesus is trying to offer his people a different way of being Israel, not based on armies and economic power and impressive national institutions, but based on faith and loyalty to Israel's Messiah: her King who came not to be served, not to lord it over her enemies, but rather to serve and lay down earthly power in favour of the power of love.

It is part of our human nature isn't it, that we want to try and protect ourselves: understandably we want to avoid getting hurt. Unfortunately we also have a tendency to want to avoid taking responsibility when things get difficult, and so we blame other people and see them as a threat. Israel was called to be a 'light to the world', to demonstrate what it looks like to the world to live as citizens of God's kingdom, his kingdom of justice and mercy and peace: but that required them to trust God rather than their own strength. And they refused and tried to turn God's kingdom into a pale imitation of all the other earthly kingdoms. And we still risk doing the same today: we too are invited to live as citizens of God's Kingdom; to live as if God's love is the bedrock of reality in the universe; to live in the light of God's mercy showing it to one another; to care for God's fragile creation entrusted to us, to share and enjoy together; to live generously as befits those who are made in the image of a generous God.

But all too often we turn the church into an arena for our own power games: where we try to make God serve our own interests, instead of listening to work out how we can serve his; where we seek status and form hierarchies and cliques to protect our fragile egos at others expense. And that's simply not the fruit that Jesus is looking for: so in the reading he talks about this fig tree that is barren, and nobody has any use for a fruitless fruit tree - the only question is whether you chop it down now or give it another year in case it produces something then. But things don't look good for the fruitless tree: "Unless you repent", says Jesus, "You will perish just as they did."

Part of the reason we keep Lent is so that we are confronted by these words. Lent is about self-examination and change, the opportunity to ask ourselves:

- Are we on the right track?
- Is our attitude to the church a healthy one?
- Are we focused on Jesus or on the institution that bears his name?
- Are we focused on Jesus or on the memory of a national Christian culture, a Christian empire which is long gone, but still shapes our sense of being a special nation?

My prayer is that if the Church of England was dis-established tomorrow, and if the diocese of York was declared insolvent, and if Beverly Minster was demolished by an earthquake, the Church of God in Beverly Minster would still be singing God's praises, because the love of God in Jesus Christ would still be exactly the same: except maybe, we would see it more clearly; appreciate it more deeply; and share it more willingly.

So this Lent may God make you, and make this church, fruitful in his service: as you focus on Jesus himself more clearly; as you put your trust more completely in his hands; and as you take up your cross and walk with him towards Holy Week and Easter.