

Suffering happens ...

... the Resurrection transforms it

A sermon given on the Third Sunday of Lent, 20th March 2022 by the Associate Vicar the Revd Wendy Wale in Beverley Minster

Luke 13:1-9

Living in the countryside as we do, the smell of manure is probably familiar to all of us. There are certain times of year when you just can't miss its aroma wafting across the fields -deeply unpleasant, but an essential part of the farming year without which the crop's growth will be less fruitful. That was perhaps not the image you would hope to have in your head at the start of a talk on a Sunday morning, but the whole Gospel reading today is about things you would probably rather didn't happen.

Jesus begins with two examples of human suffering, both of which would have been in people's recent memory, the heroes at the time. The first occurred when Pontius Pilate punished some Galileans by killing them and then mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices that they had brought to the temple. This shocking and sacrilegious act was caused by a direct result of deliberate and intentional human cruelty.

The second was an incident that happened by the pool at Siloam. There had evidently been a tower beside the pool which had collapsed, killing 18 people. And whilst this could have been due to shoddy workmanship or neglect, it was clearly not a deliberate act, but the suffering caused was just as great for those affected - it can only be explained by misfortune or bad luck.

If I invite you to call to mind this morning a time in your life when you experience the greatest suffering, I imagine it would fall into one of those two categories - things that were a result of deliberate action or things that were deeply unfortunate.

All of us have suffered because of the pandemic during the past two years: some physically; some emotionally; some through bereavement; some through the impact on their mental health and relationships. We are only just beginning to tell the stories and process the pain. But we know, like the tower at Siloam, the suffering was not caused deliberately, although incredibly real.

The situation in Ukraine, however, is clearly a direct result of deliberate human cruelty. Most of us are finding it almost impossible to comprehend. The images are unbearable to watch, the desire for an individual to have power and control leading to unchecked violence, destruction and death.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus doesn't try and explain either kind of suffering. It is simply a stated recognition that human suffering happens. It is real, it is painful, and it touches us all.

As we heard read in Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways. My ways" says the Lord.

But instead Jesus tells us a parable about manure. Other metaphors are available but not appropriate to use from this particular pulpit - manure happens, as they say. Jesus says a man had a fig tree planted, but no fruit came from the tree. For three years he found no fruit, so he told the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener said, "Give it one more year. I'm going to put manure on it - if it doesn't bear fruit next year, then you can cut it down."

What happens with manure is that animals dump their droppings. Those droppings are then gathered up and turned into fertiliser, and that fertiliser, as described earlier, provides nutrients to aid the growth of vegetation. Finally, the animal eats that vegetation. It is the model form of recycling. It's what the film *The Lion King* calls 'The Circle of Life.'

The key point of these three stories this morning is to see how the two kinds of suffering constitutes a kind of manure. Manure happens: sometimes manure happens because someone caused it; sometimes manure happens just because it happens. Either way, these stories are saying that such miserable, painful and distressing parts of our lives can become part of the soil out of which new life comes. You can just let it be manure: look at it; resent its smell; see its dirt, soiling everything around it; and try and get as far away from it as possible so you can't smell it anymore. Or you can put it to use to bring about new life and growth.

The word manure comes from the same root as manufacture or manoeuvre. They all refer to things you do with your 'manus' or hands - to man-ipulate things to become useful. The parable is saying, don't just stare at the fig tree and complain and despair

- take the manure that has happened in your life and put it to work to give this tree a new life.

The miracle of life is the out of the manure and dirt of the soil comes fruit and hope and delight. But you have to participate in the process, to dig in the dirt, to let your experience become part of its miraculous transformation.

During the time of lockdown came stories of hope, of communities drawn together, mutual aid groups formed, streets uniting to break isolation, manure being shovelled with every doorstep delivery, every health worker persisting against the odds, every new friendship formed.

When Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe Ratcliffe was detained in Iran six years ago, her husband, Richard, used his devastation and suffering to relentlessly pursue justice, to work for her release. He poured his manure into campaigns, protests, hunger strikes, and others joined him. Just three days ago, his efforts produced the sweetest fruit of all - her release and return home to join him and their precious daughter. I'm sure I'm not the only one who wept as the images appeared of them being reunited on English soil.

In the current despair of the Ukrainian suffering, we are already seeing the start of manure being put to incredible use through financial and physical donations, homes being offered to refugees and people risking their lives to save others.

But this parable isn't just an encouragement to let nothing in life go to waste and to find courage to let our manure become a fertiliser for the growth of others. There's something else here. It's a story about a tree. When we realise that these three stories describe all the evil and the sadness of the world and how they find their resolution in a tree, we can see what this story is really about.

Jesus is the one who says, "give the tree of life a chance." Jesus is the one who is lifted up on that tree. Jesus is the one who takes all the manure of the world, the vile intention and the sad misfortune into himself on the tree. Through his life and death, manure turns to fruit and some while later, women do come back to that place early in the morning to see whether the gardener has done his work. They witness what takes place when all the manure of the history of the world has been taken into that tree and transformed into the fruit of Salvation. It's called Resurrection.

The parable doesn't hold back from the fact that we don't know when suffering might happen. We've perhaps all become far more aware of this in recent times. This season of Lent, facing our mortality and confessing our sins, seems more appropriate than ever. However, the parable invites us into hope. It invites us to share our deepest sorrows and sharpest pains to permit the Holy Spirit to make our manure part of the miracle of God's fruitfulness. It's not a process we undergo alone. For in Christ, God became the tree that takes all the manure of the world up into itself. And by the miracle at the heart of all things turns its smell, its damage, its vileness and agony into fruit that will delight and feed and thrill and satisfy us and all of God's creation for evermore.

Reading Texts

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.' ⁶ Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" ⁸ He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' '