

Public executions used to be a spectator sport. Even today we are all fascinated by a good disaster – as long as it's happening to something else. Disaster and scandal sell magazines and newspapers and keep news shows in business.

This human tendency to be interested in bad news was as prevalent in Jesus' day as it is now. In today's gospel reading, Jesus is asked, "Did you hear about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices?" Presumably these people were killed while they were at the temple offering sacrifice. Jesus uses this as a teaching moment. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" In other words, "do you think that somehow you are better than these people that you glory in their misfortune?" And then he relates it to accidental death – "do you think that the people killed by a falling tower were somehow more sinful than everyone else living in Jerusalem?"

I don't think that Jesus is talking about why bad things happen to good people, but about the foolish idea that we are superior to others. "Unless you repent," he says, "you will all perish just as they did."

When things go badly wrong we want to make sense of it. We look for someone or something to blame. "She got cancer because of her diet- if only she hadn't eaten all that meat" or "I got cancer because of the stress caused by my last parish." Those are both statements I have heard in the last few months. There may indeed be causes we can point to – the Galileans may have been insurgents, the tower may have been badly engineered – but our desire is to blame. When we have someone to blame we can feel better and safer. This is part of the underlying mechanism of scapegoating.

Often we blame God. We think we must be being punished. There is a strand of Biblical teaching which suggests that God disciplines us, and we equate this with being punished for having been bad. Many of us, however sophisticated, still have a big angry God in our heads who pops out when things go wrong and wags his finger at us. "Did you really think I loved you after all you've done?"

This is one of the reasons that people lose their faith. They think that if God loves them there will be no personal disasters. All disasters will happen to other people. Then something terrible happens – a child is killed, a job is lost amid false accusations – and the big angry God wags his finger at them. They feel that God has failed to keep his side of the bargain. Surely the deal was that if we are good nothing bad will happen, right?

When 9/11 happened there were many people who were not in the Twin Towers at the time who should have been. Were they somehow better than all those who died?

Jesus says, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Clearly we are all going to die, so what can he mean by this? If we repent will we be saved from disaster? No, it just doesn't work that way. God's love is just as great for those stabbed in Anaheim yesterday, for the family murdered by their father in India this morning, and for those killed by Russian and Syrian bombing today, as for those of us sitting here in these pews.

We are all the same. We are all connected. In that mysterious web of life, their disaster IS our disaster.

Luke has given us a second teaching of Jesus' in this section of his gospel. They are in some way connected in Luke's mind because he does not start a new section as he typically does with "at that time" or "on the Sabbath" or with a short description of where Jesus was and who was with him. Here

he just continues straight on, "Then he told this parable..." So there is a relationship. What light can the parable of the fig tree throw on all this?

When the big angry God is at the forefront of our minds we will think that the owner who wants to cut down the tree is God. The God who thinks we've really had enough time to shape up and we've finally blown it. But what if this is just a teaching story about farming? What if we aren't meant to think that anyone is God?

Perhaps the reason Jesus told this story is to show that even a farmer will give a tree another chance and will give it more fertilizer; try to help it be the best fig tree it can be. If that's what farmers do, can't we believe that God will do even better for us?

Instead of cutting us down because we're not bearing enough fruit, God will give us more fertilizer. God does not punish people by having towers fall on them, or letting them experience pain. God's love for us is so great that every time we turn towards God, every little step of repentance that we take is met by a bigger divine movement towards us.

Christ's saving work in his life, death and resurrection is available for all who turn towards God. Yes we will all die - hopefully peacefully in our beds but maybe in accident or disaster. But those of us who are enrolled in the reign of God know that this is not the only reality. We are the ones who are living the future as if it is already here. We are the ones who know that God's mercy is abundant and God's love is everlasting. We may die, yet we will not perish in fear and terror but in the quiet confidence that we can rest in God's arms.

This is one of the meanings of Christ's death and resurrection. He showed that God is powerful even over death. Whether we persevere over it or deny it, death is an ever present reality in our lives and in our culture. But it is not a big deal in God's culture. Yes, Jesus died a horrible death. But he came back to life. Just like childbirth can be terribly painful yet women forget the pain in the joy of the new life; so the pain of a difficult death is forgotten and obliterated by the joy of the resurrection.

We can perish without hope or we can die knowing that God is holding us, because during our lifetimes we have sought out God. We have longed for God, and God has responded to us. Not perhaps in the way we expect. Not perhaps keeping us free from personal disaster and pain, but God has turned to us as we have turned to God.

John Bradford, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican who was a renowned preacher and eventually a martyr is reputed to have said whenever he saw people being led to execution, "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford."

When we hear accounts of disaster, let us respond with compassion, and the love that God nurtures in our hearts. It is through the grace of God that we take very breath. It is through the grace of God that we live in peace and plenty. It is through the grace of God that we know that dying is not the end, and that God's love and life conquer every expression of death.