

Moments of Crisis, Moments of Grace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 23 March 2025

A Reflection by Rev David Gill

Lent 3C

Isaiah 55: 1-13; Luke 13: 1-9

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Back in the days when we read newspapers instead of computer screens, we could look forward to a daily diet of comic strips. My favourite was “*Peanuts*”. Remember “*Peanuts*”? It featured Charlie Brown, who was one of life’s victims; Lucy, one of life’s irritants; and their dog Snoopy, one of life’s wise commentators.

In one strip, Snoopy’s doghouse had burned to the ground. A great tragedy. He’d lost his record collection, his pool table, even his Van Gogh painting. We see Snoopy sitting there, surveying the ruins, when Lucy turns up and decides to give him religion.

“You know why your doghouse burned?” she says. “*Because you sinned, that’s why*”. Snoopy considers this proposition for a moment, then sticks out his tongue and says “*Blah!*” In the last frame we see him with a thought bubble that says “*Her kind deserves to be blah-ed*”.

I’m with Snoopy on that. Shonky religion does deserve to be named and shamed. And there’s an awful lot of that kind of religion around right now.

It gets airplay after every natural disaster. Something happens, and within hours someone, somewhere, is sure to say God is punishing the victims. Exactly what God might be punishing them for depends, of course, on the speaker’s prejudices.

Like the tragic Christchurch earthquake in 2011. Within hours, an American website had announced that God was getting one back on the Kiwis because they had “*lesbians running loose on the south island as if they own the place*”.

Snoopy would have known what to do with that!

We hear such statements and we cringe. We cringe because life is not that simple. Because it’s wrong to exploit someone’s suffering to promote an agenda of your own. Because there’s something deep in the biblical faith that warns against wanting to know more than we mortals ever can.

Leaders of the early church knew the danger. St Augustine put it well: “*If you think you understand, then it’s not God you’re talking about!*” – a warning, incidentally, that should give pause to those who ridicule faith, as much as to our fundamentalist friends when they think they are upholding it.

It's not just the facile talk about divine punishment. The same logic is used in reverse, when people credit their worldly success to God's blessing. This is a problem for Pentecostalism, where you sometimes find preachers proclaiming a so-called "*prosperity gospel*". Give your life to the Lord, goes their message, and everything thereafter will be beer and skittles.

The direct linkage of obedience and blessing is not only simplistic. It's politically loaded. The rich are rich because they are pleasing to God. The poor are poor because they're not. The affluence of the former, therefore, should be protected and reinforced. The poverty of the latter is their own fault and nobody else's problem. Theologically this is nonsense, but it provides a comfortable religious home for some who find themselves on the far right of politics.

Of course, there are parts of the Bible that think this way. In the book of Proverbs, for example, and some of the psalms, we find Biblical writers assuming a direct connection between obeying God and flourishing, disobeying God and suffering.

But elsewhere there's a more nuanced, more mature understanding. Some prophetic writings and some psalms express honest perplexity about life's dramas. There is the anguished heart-searching of the book of Job. There is the life story of Jesus himself. In terms of earthly rewards, he was a loser. Prosperity? Hardly. His cross stands as the ultimate repudiation of all simplistic notions of reward and punishment.

No surprise then that this morning's gospel has Jesus rejecting that approach. He refers to two recent tragedies: some Jews who had been slaughtered by the Romans while offering sacrifices in Jerusalem, and 18 people crushed when a tower collapsed in Siloam. Were the victims being punished by God? No, he says. Do not think that way.

At another time, in another place, people had asked him "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Neither, Jesus told them. That's not how it works.

But back to this morning's passage. Jesus doesn't only correct some shonky religion. He goes further. He shifts the conversation.

Enough about those people in Jerusalem and Siloam, he says. You're being distracted by the wrong question. Don't waste time pointing at the lives of others and trying to connect the dots. What about you? What matters is not why something happened to someone else. The important question is: what in your life may need turning around?

Then, to dramatize that question, he cites the very tragedies they'd been discussing. That's life, he seems to be saying. Tragedies do occur. Heartbreaks do happen. But these things should press us to see more clearly what life is for, to review more energetically what our priorities may be, to direct more resolutely where our lives should be headed.

Of course, it's only human to seek meaning in tragedy. Be it a mega-tragedy involving millions or a micro-tragedy involving your life alone, you try to solve the riddle. You want to fill the silence. You yearn to make sense of the madness.

But Jesus says no, don't get stuck trying to answer the unanswerable. Rather, seize on those moments of crisis, which come to all of us, so that they become moments of growth, even moments of blessing.

Now that's a big ask.

When I was a kid my father would sometimes irritate me beyond words with his response to the various disasters of my childhood. Whether I'd fallen off a bike, failed an exam or come off second best in a fight, he would tell me "*David, this is an important learning experience*" – or words to that effect. It was never what I wanted to hear, of course, but he was right.

And it holds true not only for the dramas of childhood but for the tragedies and heartbreaks of adulthood as well. They too can be occasions for growth, even moments of grace. If we manage to deal with them the right way.

If!

Some – many – do manage to approach things that way. I am constantly amazed by people who have passed through terrible experiences and emerged not broken, not bitter, scarred yes, but somehow enriched. Those who have stared hell in the face, yet still are still able to smile. With a joy that comes not from the surface but from deep, deep down.

I guess the writer Christine Caine was thinking of such people when she wrote: "*Sometimes when you're in a dark place you think you've been buried, but actually you've been planted*".

Speaking of things planted, do you remember how this morning's gospel finished? With a fig tree and an extravagant gardener, who wanted to waste yet more energy on a tree that wasn't showing any sign of bearing fruit. That thing is useless, said the owner. Chop it down. No, the gardener insisted, I want to work on it.

Lent is a good time to let the divine gardener go to work on our lives too. We can help by clearing away some of the rubbish.

Clear away the clutter of unanswerable questions, haunting guilt, lingering regret. Toss out those broken pieces of yesterday. Life is too short.

We are not here to explain the inexplicable. We're not here to fret over what is past, to dwell on what might have been.

We're here to revel in the ever-present mystery of grace.

For life is not about loving answers. It's about loving God and other people.

It is about discovering that we are ourselves loved – undeservedly, unconditionally, extravagantly, promiscuously and without limit.

It's about drawing the consequences of that amazing grace. Liberating consequences. For ourselves. And for our world.