

Luke 13:1-9 Overcoming Complacency

I had a meeting with a colleague a while back. Over lunch we talked of many things, before getting down to work. One of the topics that came up was skin cancer. She told me how she had discovered a small red patch on her skin, and had thought she'd better get it checked out. But life was busy and she didn't get to it for some time. Finally she made an appointment, and went to the cancer clinic. The clinic did a test and found it was malignant. The doctor told her that they'd only just caught it in time – any longer and it would have gone into her bloodstream and probably taken her out! My colleague was very, very fortunate that she had stirred herself out of her complacency when she did and made the appointment to see the doctor!

Complacency can be deadly – and not just physically!

Our Gospel reading from Luke speaks about judgement – a topic we don't really spend much time on these days. Once upon a time, most preaching was characterised by sermons on judgement – they were called “Hellfire & Brimstone” sermons or “Turn or Burn sermons”. They're out of fashion now, which may or may not be a bad thing. Perhaps one of the down sides of a lack of preaching on judgement is that we can become spiritually complacent!

Luke 13 begins with two references to local calamities, which Jesus uses to point his hearers – and us – to the reality of judgement!

The first calamity he refers to was a politically motivated event. Though we don't really know what the exact circumstances were, we can safely assume that Pilate – the governor at the time – was responsible for a massacre in the Jewish temple during the preparation of the sacrifices. Thus the blood of those massacred was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices.

The second calamity was a natural disaster. Perhaps there was an earth tremor, perhaps there was just shoddy workmanship, but a tower in Siloam fell down, and 18 people were killed. Something like that in our own day would make the 6.00 news, wouldn't it? It was a great tragedy in that day also!

What is the point of these two references? In order to make sense of them, we need to understand that Jewish thought at the time would have explained these calamities by saying that the victims had sinned, and this was therefore God's judgement.

Jesus, as he so often did, challenged his listeners' understanding of God. He began by inferring that the disasters had nothing to do with the sins of those involved. He commented on both events by asking a rhetorical question: “Do you think that those who suffered in this way were worse sinners than those who didn't?” Of course the answer is no. But then Jesus didn't elaborate on this, he merely pointed to the events as signs, and said, “Unless you repent you'll all die!”

Those were strong words! Decades later, Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” he said. Then three chapters later, echoing Jesus’ teaching, he said, “The wages of sin is death.” There is more to that last verse, but I’ll come back to that in a minute.

Jesus wanted to shake his hearers out of their complacency. For too long, the Jews had put their faith in ritual laws to make them acceptable to God. All too often, the Jews would be satisfied with the letter of their ritual law, and completely miss the heart of it.

On one occasion, Jesus tackled their hypocrisy, and didn’t mince words! **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.**

He continued on in a similar vein in this passage, finishing with the words, **“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”**

Is it any wonder that Jesus upset the religious rulers of the day?

I wonder how today’s church would shape up under Jesus’ scrutiny? What must Jesus think of a church that preaches fidelity and chastity, yet whose leaders are caught in adultery and sexual abuse?

What must Jesus think of a church that preaches love and compassion for the poor, yet sits comfortably within the decadent, wasteful, western world and its consumerism and wealth? Are we doing enough to alleviate the suffering of those both on our own shores, and those on other shores - such as the refugees in Syria & Africa & other parts of the world?

And how do we measure up under God’s scrutiny as individuals? Do we trust in religious habit or ritual more than in God? Are we guilty of any hypocrisy? Are we living up to his standards? The answer is that though we are probably doing the best we can, if we’re honest, we know that we don’t fully measure up to God’s standards.

Does this mean we are in danger of incurring God’s wrath?

Without trying to scare anyone, God’s word is in fact very clear! All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death! Repent or perish! Turn or burn! It’s uncomfortable teaching, isn’t it?

Perhaps that’s why this preaching has gone ‘out of fashion’

I said earlier that the second of those two verses in the letter to the Romans holds more: The whole of Romans 6:23 says, “the wages of sin is death...but the FREE GIFT of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” There is not only judgement, there is mercy and grace.

This alternate side to God’s nature is found in the little story about the fig tree.

It’s a simple scenario – a farmer has a fig tree in his orchard which for three years has borne no fruit. He’s fed up with it. “Cut it down,” he says to his workman. “It’s just taking up space!” The workman intercedes, and talks the farmer into leaving it for another season to see if he can get it to bear fruit. The inference is that the farmer agrees.

Now what’s that all about? Again, it’s a parable about judgement, but in this story we see the other side of God’s nature. We see his mercy. We see his grace. The tree is not bearing fruit, and deserves to be cut down, but the farmer is willing to let it remain for another year. He gives it another chance!

And isn’t that so often what God does with us? He gives us a second chance, sometimes even more than one! His love and mercy and patience with us are at times unfathomable – yet that is who God is.

But we can never take that for granted, as the first two references show us. While we know our sins are forgiven through Christ as we believe in him, and put our trust in him, that does not give us licence to sit back and become complacent about reaching for God’s standards.

One of the insidious problems of complacency though, is that it dulls our spiritual senses. We can reach a place of satisfaction with our spiritual life that dulls any desire to grow. It might be a place we have striven to reach, or perhaps it’s a place we’ve subsided to. Either way, it is a dangerous place to be.

I was in such a place when my children were at primary school. I was in one of those ‘seasons’ in my walk with God where I’d cooled off. He’d ceased to be the most important thing in my life. Our lifestyle was frantically busy, and God had just got crowded out. Every now and then, the Holy Spirit would get through, and I’d feel a pang of guilt over my slack spiritual state. I remember walking along the beach one evening, when the Holy Spirit nudged me about it. I still remember the off-hand prayer I prayed. “Lord, I know I’m pretty well dropping of the edge here. But here’s the thing – I don’t really care any more. If you want me back, YOU’LL have to do something. I just don’t have the motivation.”

God gave me one of those second chances. He answered that prayer through the help of a friend as we began praying together. He fanned the flame, and my spirit caught alight all over again!

When we're in that place of complacency, and we actually find we don't even care any more, perhaps the very first thing we need to do is confess THAT to God, and ask his help. It is certainly a prayer he will answer.

Our passage today encourages us to examine our relationship with God. It calls us to snap out of our complacency if we are guilty of it. We are called to repent – not just when we first commit our lives to Christ, but every time his spirit convicts us of sin. We are reminded that while God is loving and merciful and forgiving; while he is a God of second chances – his judgement is very real!

As we continue our journey through Lent, may we take some time this week to come before God, and ask him to help us to overcome any complacency that may have settled into our spirits, and reignite our hearts for him.

There is a prayer from the daily office in our prayer books, which I'd like to close with:

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
So may the light of your presence O God,
Set our hearts on fire with love for you;
Now and forever! **Amen.**