

## Readings for the Third Sunday in Lent

23<sup>rd</sup> March 2025

### First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-9

The Lord says this: Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

### Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

### Gospel: St 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. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

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. 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?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

### **A Reflection for the Third Sunday in Lent**

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,' says the Lord.

So we read in today's passage from Isaiah, and so it seems when we read instructions in the Bible that say things like 'you that have no money, come, buy and eat.'

I was probably quite an awkward child, though perhaps not unusually so. If I was told to do something, especially something I didn't want to do, I wanted to know why. My endless questioning sometimes ended with statements such as 'because I'm your mother', or 'because I say so'. Such explanations were completely unsatisfactory, of course!

However, when we come to God, we have a different difficulty in our desire for explanations and understanding: God is God and we are not. Our minds simply cannot encompass the fullness of God, even though we try to make God manageable and even try to force God to fit into our own structures of understanding ... an ever-present danger for all who dare to preach. But that is not to say that we shouldn't try to understand what the Scriptures have to say; of course, we should, and we should do so with a large helping of humility.

Quite apart from the instruction to buy without money, we have some other seemingly strange tales in our readings today: Galileans whose blood was mingled with sacrifices, to name but one. We don't know the history of the people apparently murdered by Pilate in the Temple, or those killed when the tower of Siloam fell, and they are not mentioned in the other Gospels, though presumably they would have been well-known incidents to the Gospel's original audience. However, we can look for the underlying themes which here point us to God's call to repentance.

Repentance is a good Lenten theme! In Jesus' time, if people suffered bad fortune, if disasters happened to them, it was generally seen as God's judgement, that in some way they deserved what had happened, and some people still think that way today. While we don't know the background to these incidents, we do know that some people come to tell Jesus, I imagine presuming that he will condemn the victims, but Jesus does not do so. Nor does he provide any explanation of innocent human suffering. He does, however, make it clear that these are not acts of judgement by a capricious god. He says that those who died were no more sinful than anyone else, and that we all need to repent, even if we are not suffering some calamity in our lives.

In this day and age, I am not sure that repentance is what we feel called to when things go wrong in our lives, even though I hope we turn to prayer. But I think it can often be even harder to feel the need to repent when things are going well for us; we become complacent, perhaps we even feel favoured or blessed, we start to depend on our own resources instead of on God. But we all need to repent.

Jesus recognises the precariousness of life, but also that it is precious, and we are precious to God. So Jesus continues with the parable of the fig tree, an image of repentance. The fig tree has not done what it should have done and so the logical step is to cut it down. But the gardener, whom we can understand as God, has mercy on it and wants to

give it another chance, and a chance that includes the gardener lavishing care on it and doing everything possible to enable it to succeed and to bear fruit.

Any and all of us fail in our attempts to be faithful to God, and Paul gives many examples from the history of the people in the passage from Corinthians. But he also reminds us that God remains faithful to us, giving us the resources to endure what we face in life. He paints a word picture of a God who is patient, forgiving and ever-hopeful of human repentance. Isaiah has similar ideas, even though we may not understand God's thoughts, he says:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

The Greek word translated as 'repent' in today's Gospel is derived from *metanoia*, which means more than simply being sorry. It is not a few words of apology and then carry on with business as usual. This sort of repentance is about a complete change of heart leading to a change in behaviour. It's about transformation.

This understanding of repentance could be expanded into three words instead of one: returning, repentance, restoration. In order to repent, we need first to turn back to God, to return. And, in doing so, yes, we do need to say sorry for all that we have done wrong. That can often be hard to acknowledge – we can be very good at self-justification.

Then comes transformative repentance that is about the way we live our lives, making fundamental changes in how we live and do things, perhaps expressed in prayerfulness, in kindness and compassion for others, in generosity with our time and resources, in care for our planet, in being peaceable people in a warring world. Such transformation is not a one-off, it's an ongoing process. And I am sure that we all recognise that we won't be perfect, that we will make mistakes, but the important thing is that we keep on trying.

And then restoration; as we live repentant lives, so our relationship with God is restored. As we are nurtured and cared for by God, so we bear the fruit he would have us bear and we become God's agents of transformation in the world.

In the parable of the fig tree, it's worth noting that both the landowner and the gardener want the same thing: for a tree that bears figs, but they have different timescales and tactics. There is note of urgency here, that we should not delay, but also a reminder that God's timeline is not ours.

When I was child, my Granny had a fig tree growing up the wall of her cottage that seemed to drip with figs each year; which were greatly enjoyed by many people. Granny loved figs and so did my mother. My mother also had a fig tree on which she lavished much care and attention, but which struggled to produce a few, very precious figs each year. Perhaps both are metaphors, one for the abundance God calls us to in our lives, the other for the care God wants to give us, and both for the importance and preciousness of the fruit we bear whatever the magnitude of our fruitfulness.