**Sermon Lent 3C March 20th 2022**

**Glenaven**

**Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9**

**Some of the first stories we hear end with this line; and they all lived happy ever after. The prince rescued the maiden in distress, the hero slayed the monster, the humble and honest man prospered in the end; and they all lived happily ever after.**

**Later in life it still happens doesn’t it? In movies wrongs are righted, justice is done, aggression punished.**

**Would that it were so, remember Idi Amin, who terrorised Uganda for years, whose crimes went as far as cannibalism? If the evil were punished then how would his story have ended? In fact he died in well heeled exile in Saudi Arabia.**

**When the truly appalling first and second leaders of North Korea died their poor subjects had to engage in a compulsory grief and the rituals around their funerals more or less proclaimed them gods.**

**I suspect Vladimir Putin’s days will end not in a way we probably imagine he deserves, or would gratify our sense of justice but in well heeled exile or in the delusion and isolation of apparent infallibility as a kind of new Tzar.**

**Yet we still cling somehow to a deep belief that things work out, that the just are rewarded and the unjust punished. Look at the first part of our Gospel, some Galileans had been killed under Pilate’s orders; had they deserved their fate? It seems some did think just that, if we look at Jesus’s words;**

*“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?****3****I tell you, no!*

He then talks about some people who died when a tower collapsed.

***4****Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?****5****I tell you, no!*

Even now deep with us there is an uncomfortable and irrational belief that people get what they deserve. You might remember some of the commentary around AIDS, that it was the price of sin be it that of Gay men or IV drug users. Following the Boxing Day Tsunami some Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders described the event as the penalty of the sins of their less rigorous adherents holidaying in the likes of Thailand and Bali.

We know that what befalls people is no reflection on them, no judgement. Three years ago in the Christchurch shootings did we imagine those who were murdered were found wanting in some way? What sin have the people of Ukraine committed?

But Jesus doesn’t say those who suffered were blameless, just they were no better and no worse than the rest of us He tells his hearers “And you’d better repent because you actually deserve it just as much as they do.” The injustice if you like is not that they copped it, but that you got let off, so make the most of the extra chance you’ve been given.

Jesus is making it very clear that our own safety is not evidence that we’re up to scratch. He’s saying, as he says so often when people seek reassurance that they’re better then someone else, “If you think that someone else is more evil than you, you just haven’t faced up to yourself yet.” Or perhaps more succinctly “You need to take a good hard look at yourself.”

Now don’t worry if you’re somewhat confused – this is quite a paradox. Jesus is telling us to take warning from these disasters, that we should allow them to make us look at how we are living and whether we are on the right path, but he is also saying that being on the right path is no guarantee of safety. He’s not saying “Repent and you’ll be safe”, he’s saying “You’re not safe, full stop. And maybe that will give you cause to think about your life.”

So if repentance is no insurance policy, what’s it all about? The reading we heard from Isaiah 55:1-9 gives us a much clearer picture. But before we look at the reasons for it, let’s look at the description of it so that we know what we are talking about. Isaiah calls us to leave our way of life and change our way of thinking. A change of mind and a change of life. But it is not just a case of giving something up. We turn from something and to something. “Turn to the Lord our God,” says Isaiah, “he is merciful and quick to forgive.”

And then in case we missed the point he reminds us that God’s ways and thoughts are nothing like our ways and thoughts. This is no small change, not tinkering with the fine tuning. This is a radical reorientation. This is facing up to the fact that everyone of us has dragged the image of God through the mud, and mostly deluded ourselves into thinking that we were basically OK while we did it.

And if you think that that’s not you, just listen for the voices inside yourself. Some of them are echoed here by Isaiah. “Why are you spending all your wages and you’re still hungry? Why commit your resources to what does not satisfy? Why is there still this nagging hunger, this unquenchable thirst that you just can’t quite silence? Why is it that the harder you run the more you seem to be getting nowhere? Why is it that the more you put into place the pieces of the postcard pictures of happiness, the more fragile and hollow your happiness feels? Why is it that you always feel like there’s something not quite right but you can’t put your finger on it?

If that’s you, there are those here who can tell you better than me that when you really start taking those questions seriously and look at yourself hard enough to start seeing what it is that cuts you off from that which your heart yearns for, then you will start to recognise the brokenness within you. You will start to see that you are no better, just different, than those people whose character most disgusts you. You will recognise that if buildings only fell on those who deserved it the ceiling would crash in right now and take us all out.

But Isaiah doesn’t use this to hit us all over the head and beat us up over how evil we all are. Because Isaiah knows that God is not like that. “The Lord is merciful and quick to forgive.”

Instead the call is to hear and respond to the extravagant generosity of God’s offer. To hear God saying “Do you hunger, then come and eat. Do you thirst, come and drink. Come and enjoy the best of food and wine, of milk and honey. It will cost you nothing. Come to me and you will have life. Life, overflowing, abundant, extravagant life. Come.”

If you stop still long enough to hear those voices from within you, those yearnings and hungers and deep longings, then you will also hear the voice of God saying “Come, I long to satisfy those longings. Come, eat and drink and have your fill.”

There is still no neat insurance policy against sickness or disaster, but there is an offer of a way into life, into a depth of experience and fulfilment that sickness and disaster cannot take from you. We’ve seen something of what this looks like. We’ve seen it in a man who was so free, so deeply at peace that they could drag him outside the city and crucify, and instead of cursing them in bitterness and terror, he prays to his God for mercy to be shown to them, for their opportunity to turn around and join him in the new order of things.

You know that within you there is the capacity for that kind of freedom, that kind of love. But it doesn’t show itself too often does it? I know it is within me because I am crafted in his image, as are each of us. But that capacity in me gets very easily swamped by my own insecurities, my selfishness, my fears. I’m not saying that Jesus experienced no fear, we know he did, but he befriended his fear so that the fear no longer dictated his actions.

We are not offered an escape from the world of aerial bombardment or, of borderline insane leaders, pandemics and all those fearfully random things that can overtake any of us. But in the midst of this fearful incompleteness, this often cruel world a new order is being built, and herein this place where words of life and hope are shared, and where we gather around the table of the one who lived and died and where we find ourselves renewed in courage and hope.

May it be so among us Amen