

A sermon by The Revd Dr Ellen Clark-King,
Dean of King's College London,
preached at St Paul's Knightsbridge,
on Sunday 23rd March 2025

Reading: Luke 13:1-9 *'Repent or Perish'*

This is a hard gospel to preach on after a hard week at King's, but also one that seems to ask some of the same questions my students are asking themselves. You may have seen on the news about a student being killed by a drugged driver while sitting on a bench on Strand. She was in her second year at King's, known and loved by many of her fellow students. Another student was dangerously injured while a third is still in hospital. A shocking sudden death like this is tragic for family and friends and also shocks others into asking why her? Why did this happen to her?

Two answers to this perennial question of why bad things happen to good people, technically called theodicy, need to be dismissed from our theological thinking. The first of these Jesus debunks in the gospel reading – bad things do not happen to people because they are worse human being than you or I. Virtue or faith does not keep you safe from the vicissitudes of life and suffering is not a punishment for being evil. The Galileans did not die because of their sins but because they were vulnerable men and women living in a world of cruel empires and of human fallibility.

We also need to be clear about what Jesus means here when he talks about 'repent or the same thing might happen to you'. When we hear the word repent we tend to think of an individual moral response – a choice to change from bad to good, from sin to virtue. But such a reading would contradict what Jesus has just said – that it isn't the extent of individual sin that causes suffering. A better reading of the term in this context is complete change that embraces society as well as the individual. We need to completely change the way we are together to move away from the suffering we inflict on one another – each and every one of us needs to do better at loving our neighbour.

If we collectively repent, collectively change, then we can do the work that the parable of the fig tree calls us to – the digging, cultivating, pruning that allows the fig tree a second chance at life. The digging into the small ways that we can make the world a better place, the cultivating love and care

for others in our own hearts, the pruning away of deep-seated injustices in the way the world works. Let's view 'repent' as a call to action rather than a call to feel bad about ourselves.

That's one of the common answers to suffering. The other, that I find particularly hard to hear even though it is often spouted by people of sincere Christian faith, is that it is the will of God when these bad things happen. I can see the comfort in a theology that says everything that happens is planned by God and is for the best even if we can't see how. But the God I see in Christ, the God whose presence we feel in the Holy Spirit, is not a God who could will the death of a student in their 20's or any of the other atrocities we see unfolding in the world around us.

Instead I believe that such tragedies occur because of the inherent nature of created beings. We are fragile and finite creatures whose little lives are always rounded by death. We are creatures of free will who have the capacity to make wrong choices that harm ourselves and others. We live in a world marred by bad relationships and unjust systems that we are born into and are often outside our control. Our lives are marked by great beauty and significance but also by horror and random destruction.

This, of course, just pushes the question one step further back – if we believe God created creaturely and human life why is it the way it is? I don't think there is one answer that will satisfy all our curiosity and especially all our fears and anger. The one I hold to is that precarity and the possibility of suffering are somehow essential to allowing humanity true free will, the free will that reflects our creation in God's own image and that allows us to choose the good and to love.

But this is not what I would talk about with families and friends facing the agony of bereavement. Instead I would point to a person rather than a theory – to Jesus himself. The choice of God to experience this suffering with us, to know in the divine heart what it is to be in physical pain and to understand from the inside the devastation of grief and loss. It is not an argument that is the answer to theodicy but an act – the divine act of diving into the depth of pain and promising us that death is not the final end.

This week at King's has not really been a time for words. Instead it's been a time for listening and for presence. For acts of remembrance and respect, such as planting a cherry tree at the site of the incident. It's the same when ever any of us face the tragedies of life. We won't have the right words but we can have the right actions – the holding, the staying with, the resolution to change what we can for the better.

I want to finish with lines from the 19th century Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel that I have often used as a final blessing in other churches: *'Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So be swift to love and make haste to be kind.'* Let us change this suffering world a little for the better this week by being swift to love and making haste to be kind.

Amen.