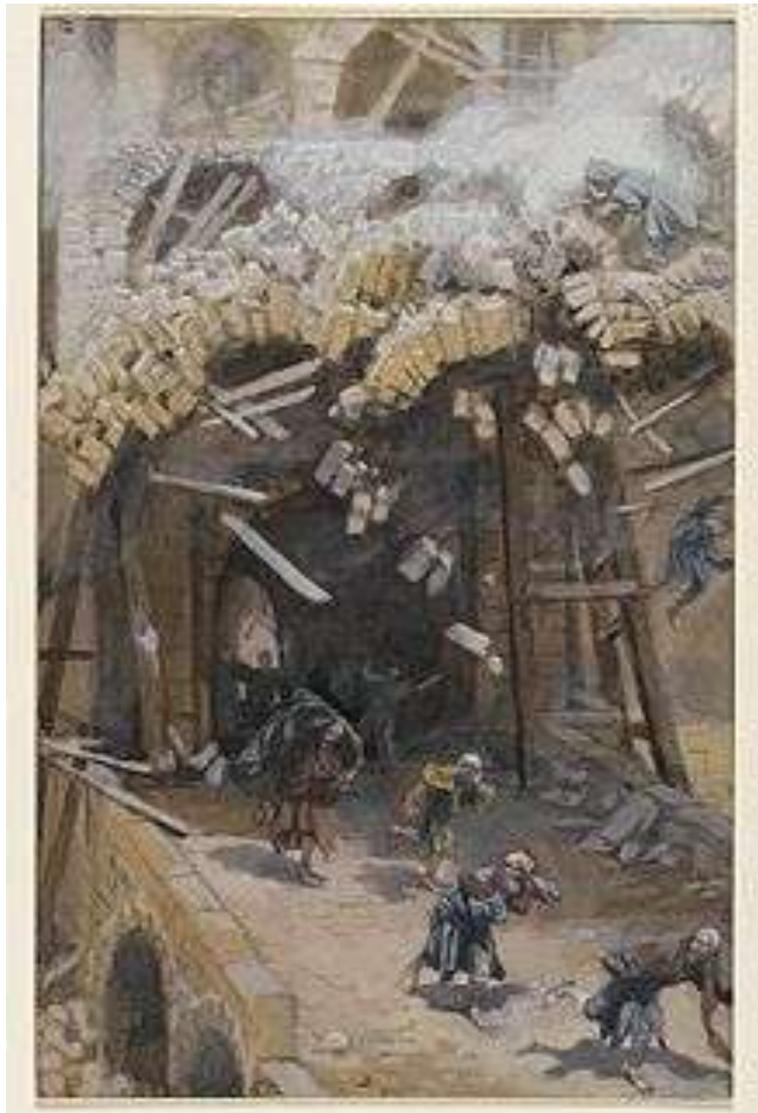


Sermon for St Francis High Heaton

Third Sunday of Lent Year C

24th March 2019



Le Tour de Siloë, James Tissot 1836-1902

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Why do bad things happen to good people?

This is a perennial question based on a false premise. It is a common human instinct when confronted with calamity to suppose that it is somehow a punishment. What have I done to deserve this? Perhaps that's because we all carry a bit of guilt in us, we've all done things we know we shouldn't have done, but we also know that God is not a puppeteer who chooses moments to cut the thread of life in an arbitrary fashion. Aged about four our daughter Emma posed a question as we were driving in the car.... she had been watching Disney Hercules and became interested in the Fates, three old women in Greek mythology spinning out the threads of people's lives, and choosing the moment to snip the thread to cause a person's death....and Emma's question was, Are the fates real? Lucky her to have a dad for a vicar... No darling, of course they're not real. Good, she said, Because if they were life wouldn't be worth living. How lucky was I to hear such wisdom from an infant. Things happen to people irrespective of their moral standing, and it is a form of idolatry to suppose that there is a divine mind that singles one person out over another.

Jesus was challenged by his listeners concerning some Galileans killed by Pilate in the act of sacrificing in the temple, such that their blood was mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. They were righteous people about their

religious duty struck down arbitrarily, was it a punishment? No, says Jesus, and he pointed to another example - the fall of the tower of Siloam which killed 18 people. Those victims weren't singled out for punishment by God either, but Jesus uses this as a pretext for a warning in 13:3 & 13:5 "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." The warning is repeated, and the word for perish is *destroy utterly*, not just died - cease to have any existence. What matters is not whether or not we live, but the character of our living, and that means a repentant heart.

The writer of Isaiah 55 calls anyone who wants to buy food, wine and milk even though they have no money, meaning of course spiritual food, the bread of righteousness, which we call justice, and that is why getting things right matter.

The victims of Pilate's cruelty cannot be held responsible for their deaths, but shall we dare call out the injustice? The arbitrary nature of the falling tower seems less clear, except we might want to know what caused the tower to fall, was it poor construction, overcrowding, or an earthquake, but if so why weren't the foundations stronger? The families of the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower are surely right in their pursuit for justice. It is a tragedy that the local authority that still cannot afford to house some of those victims, last year paid bonuses to some of its leading employees. And what of victims of cyclone Idal? The Disasters Emergency Committee

has released an appeal, and a box is available at the back of church if you'd like to donate some money that we can send from St Francis church. But to what extent is their plight the result of changing climate and rising sea levels, and the impact of industrial and economic policies that are not doing enough to combat the change? The petition which many of us have signed to take to HSBC next Saturday has greater urgency. For evil to prevail the good need only do nothing. The Lent call to repentance is a call to eat the bread of righteousness, doing what is right and just and not simply sitting back.

Leonard Cohen was a Jewish poet and songwriter, inspired by Hebrew scriptures, who wrote a poem in response to the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. It goes like this:

“All There Is To Know About Adolph Eichmann”

EYES:.....Medium
HAIR:.....Medium
WEIGHT:.....Medium
HEIGHT:.....Medium
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES...None
NUMBER OF FINGERS:.....Ten
NUMBER OF TOES.....Ten
INTELLIGENCE.....Medium

What did you expect?

Talons?

Oversize incisors?

Green saliva?

Madness?

Despite his evil, Eichmann was not a monster. What made him so frightening, and so dangerous — was how utterly normal he was. Earlier in the 1950s the Christian thinker Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that modern culture has been completely oblivious to the abiding mystery of evil in human life. The Hebrew Bible understands that mystery. Its view of human life is far from optimistic. It is in many cases profoundly pessimistic — or we might say realistic. “The wickedness of man is great on the earth” (Gen 6:5), “Sin crouches at the door” (Gen 4:7), “Woe to those who call good evil and evil good.” (Is 5:20). These are the truths that the Torah teaches, that the prophets restate, that the Psalmist echoes.

St Paul writing to the Corinthians catalogues the faults of the Israelites in the desert, but their cardinal sin was idolatry, putting human-made things first, and it is so easy to fall into this. He writes in 10:12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

What this means in a world of injustice, is that we all have a part to play. This is why the Archbishop of Canterbury asked Mutharaj Swamy to write his Lent book on Reconciliation. As our current political crisis illustrates, we live in a divided society and the calling of the church is to be an agent of reconciliation. Our church will be open for prayer next Saturday and we will make tea and coffee available in case anyone would like to come to talk. Those of us reading the Lent book have this week have been pondering the barriers to reconciliation and it's a formidable list. The reasons reconciliation is hard is because of our tendency to blame others, to stereotype others, to be concerned about material comfort, to be willing not to speak out, rushing to judge, pretending to forgive but not readily doing so, and the hardest, when someone actually apologizes and suddenly removes the reason for our conflict.....

One of the things I feel on pondering such a list is how could I ever suppose I could be an agent of reconciliation because all of those are so easy to fall into, but I remind myself with Isaiah that my thoughts are not God's thoughts, his ways are not my ways, and that therefore in this (and every) Eucharist, with the scriptures and the prayers, I am put in mind of the divine which is what will lift *me* up when *I* fall.

