**Sermon #43 20 March 2022 SG 9am BCP + 10.30 Family Worship**

**Lent 3**

**Isaiah 55: 1-9**

**Luke 13: 1-9**

In reading the Gospel today, two stories about the Galileans and a pilgrim parable, I was remined of a hymn that I don’t think we’ve sung since I’ve been here – although I have to remind myself that I’ve not been here for a liturgical year yet, or any sort of year, actually – I’m thinking of ‘*He, who would valiant be’* and in particular verse 2 –

Whoso beset him roundWith dismal stories,Do but themselves confound;His strength the more is.

No lion can him fright,He’ll with a giant fight,But he will have a rightTo be a pilgrim.

By this stage in Luke’s story, Jesus is generous with his stories, having recently told the story of the Rich Fool, who stored up treasures on earth without paying heed to those freely given in heaven. Jesus will soon go on to the parable of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, where small things have big consequences; and then he will tell the story about the Narrow Door, where the last will be first and the first shall be last.

So Jesus’s pilgrim message throughout is about change, radical change. Shortly before our passage he says, ‘Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?’ and from the tone of his words, the changes that he advocates can’t happen quickly enough.

These words of course have a terrible poignancy just now, as we pray with all of our hearts that military peace will come to what feels like a frantically unstable world.

But for me, Jesus’s message - ‘Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?’ - is one of unsettling fixed and comfortable, and possibly fruitless ways of life. Instead, he wants us to think of new ways of being His pilgrim people in the world. When we say ‘we’ve always done it this way’ in church, which we hear now and then, that’s the beginning of a conversation, and not an end.

His point here seems to be distilled in his words a few lines before our reading, where he answers his own question – ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.’

Returning to the start of our reading, Jesus is beset around with the dismal story of Galileans whose blood was spilt and mingled, seemingly with Communion wine, by a tyrannical invading power. This happened to Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador who was assassinated at Mass in 1980. Both in Galilee and in San Salvador, this is about wanting to hold on to power and doing it through shame.

We discussed shame at Lent Group last week, and Pilate here is out not just to destroy, but also to desecrate, to shame the Galileans. This is a weaponizing of shame; as Revd Carlton Turner says, ‘Living in shame has but one purpose and that is to destroy a person, to destroy a life that God gave, that God loves, that God redeems’.

So shame destroys; but God creates. God dares to see who we all truly are beyond our faults and failings. Although beset by dismal stories, as in the Galileans we have heard about and of those at Siloam that Jesus then goes on to narrate, we all have a right, and a duty, to be his Pilgrims in our world. How can this be?

I think the crux of Jesus’s argument is contained within the actions of the gardener in the parable that follows. The message from the world of Pilate in Galilee, is ‘conform or die.’ The arbitrary nature of the deaths in the two stories is characteristic of a power that is numb to the suffering of others. Jesus says that these Galileans were no worse or better than ‘all the others living in Jerusalem’, they were, in other words, normal ordinary everyday people.

The gardener himself isn’t an authority figure; he has his orders after all he should cut away this fig tree, this seemingly dead wood. But his pilgrim nature, his caring and his willingness to try something else with what he has got means that, unlike the fig tree owner, and Pilate, whose first thought is to destroy, the gardener is prepared to give the fig tree time.

This is Christlike in its pilgrim message. The gardener, rather than a savage uprooting in a way that Pilate might recognise and condone, is moved to try a different way of nurture and nourishment, to dig around the tree, to renew its roots and to try to help it along by enriching the soil around it. This pilgrim gardener wants to try to support the tree in a different way to what he was tried before – to look for another way, kindling the fire of hope, and in that, to learn new things himself.

It’s an example of what the great scholar Walter Brueggemann calls ‘The Prophetic Imagination.’ The gardener has the will to see how things might be different.

This is pilgrim talk – it’s the personality of someone who knows how to nurture, who looks for green shoots, who respects natural cycles, who knows that things don’t come to fruition at the same time as other things, and who knows that seemingly doing nothing doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re actually doing nothing.

Being Christ’s pilgrim isn’t all about actions, but nor is it about being static; the gardener isn’t going to wait forever, he will, at some point, shake the dust from his sandals and move on – but not until he has changed the contexts within which the fig tree is being given the chance to flourish.

His gracious offer is, ultimately, that of time.

If we turn to the final verse of ‘He Who Would Valiant Be’ we find these words

Then, fancies, fly away,We’ll not fear what men say;

We’ll fear not what men say – we’ll not be shamed in our pilgrim wish to walk alongside people, to nurture them, to meet them where they are, to hope that they glimpse Christ through us and that we see Christ in them in all that we do and all that we say.

Rather, we’ll take pride in our pilgrim heritage;

We’ll labour night and dayTo be a pilgrim.

Amen