

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

'Who's to blame, anyway? Give us a little more time.'

Linton, 8 am and 10am. March 24th 2019

Lent 3C Isaiah 55.1-9 Luke 13.1-9

All over the country, I should imagine, preachers have been struck by a parallel between Jesus' little parable at the end of our Gospel passage today, and current events in our nation. For three years we have been discussing our future with Europe; still no fruit has come of it; but the plea has been made, '*give it a little more time – just a little more time. Perhaps something good may come out of it after all...*'. We really ought to refrain from finding a parallel in every detail of the story – though it is just *too* tempting for me to resist mentioning the load of manure still to be chucked at the tree(!) - but of course the really significant point of the story is that that disaster is threatened if extra time isn't used well: the tree *will* be chopped down. Worryingly, the parable is open-ended: we're left wondering what happened to the fig tree in the end, just as we live in huge uncertainty about the outcome of this week's events and decisions, and just how damaging that outcome may or may not be.

Well – am I making cheap political commentary out of a Bible story, or could there be any real links between the fig tree and our nation's future?

Generally, I think, preachers tend to treat this passage as a message to individuals: God gives us time for repentance (for 'amendment of life' as it says in the BCP), but he doesn't offer time for complacency. Is it legitimate to depart from that interpretation and make social or political comment through it instead?

Yes: I think it is legitimate; in fact, more than legitimate. This story has a context in Luke's Gospel, and it's not *just* the context afforded by those two questions about whether people should be blamed for their own misfortunes – though the answer Jesus gives to that question, is very interesting and important; he repeats this answer twice, with different instances of horrible disasters befalling people, and the second time it's he, himself, who has posed the question. Each time he answers the question about any link between sin and individual suffering emphatically with the words, '*NO, I tell you*' but goes on with a '*but*' (and this is a huge '*but*'), '*but unless you repent, you will all perish, just as they did.*' (Luke 13.3 and 5).

So, Jesus shifts the perspective of his hearers from the issue of any link between individual sin and suffering (the 'what did I do to deserve this?' kind of question) to another issue. And this, I believe, sets the whole

dialogue we heard in our Gospel in a political and social context.

By the time this dialogue and parable appear in the Gospel, Jesus has been on the road to Jerusalem for quite some time, with huge crowds following him, and on that journey, several times he speaks emotionally to the heart of his nation saying *'if only'*, because he comes to it as a prophet, as well as an unexpected kind of Messiah – a prophet who sees that his nation is sleepwalking into disaster, not understanding what its national identity and its religious mission should really mean; not recognising the visitation of God, the coming of the kingdom, embodied in him; some of them intent on rebellion against Rome, others toadying up to the great power and the wealth they could accrue under its umbrella; many of those in the religious establishment interpreting the faith in ways which cut out the poor and the supposedly unclean, or justified their exploitation. This is the nation over whose capital city Jesus was to weep, prophesying the time to come (forty years later, as it happened), when not one stone would be left upon another. (See, for example, Luke 13.34-35, and 19. 41- 144.)

Those frightening words, then, about everyone perishing unless they repented, the parable of the unfruitful fig tree being given one last chance – a little more time – are set in this political and social context. They're not just about the individual blameworthiness

and experience of suffering, they're not just about the need for us each to repent and not to be complacent about God's patience with us, (though, assuredly, they can also be applied in that way) - they also have a lot to say about peoples and nations who are allowing themselves to sleepwalk into disaster. And therefore, they may also legitimately have a modern message of that kind, too.

Whether or not Brexit (of whatever kind) would be a disaster for us, whether or not the vicious instances of hatred and division this whole process has unleashed, or revealed, in our nation spell the permanent downfall of things we have valued, I just don't know. We certainly shouldn't be complacent. But, if there are dark days ahead, we should take Jesus' warnings and exhortations to his disciples to heart: to stand firm for the good, to love our neighbours as ourselves, even those from whom we most differ, to be lights that shine, to work hard as peacemakers where there may seem to be no peace, to show Christ's inclusiveness towards those whom others would shut out, to be prepared even to suffer for promoting these kingdom-values - if that's what it comes to.

But there's that other issue, too, where many people fear that all the nations of the world may have been sleepwalking towards disaster for a long time. I'm talking of course, about man-made climate change. Maybe we've used up too much of our 'extra time', and

are already experiencing the first tastes of disaster which can't be reversed. We have to hope not. But in all this, we can certainly see that it's true that those who are already suffering most severely aren't those who should be blamed the most. We have to put our house in order not only for the sake of our own descendants, but for the populations of countries like Mozambique *now*. It's a sobering thought.

So, where's the good news in all this? (I'm told that Christian preachers should always preach 'good news'.) Perhaps it's in the reminder that it really is a waste of time and energy to blame ourselves or other people for particular misfortunes. (have you ever caught yourself thinking. 'It wouldn't have happened to them if they weren't the kind of person who...?') Perhaps good news lies in the increased sense Jesus gives us that as human beings who *do* suffer, we're all in this together, so we can know and show solidarity with each other. Certainly there's good news, in holding in our minds belief in a God who really does want to offer us a way out from our destructive courses – if only we'll take it. And, above all, for us as Christians, there's Gospel in trusting in God's Son, who sees his people with clear-eyed truthfulness, and deeply mourns over their folly, and yet who doesn't shrink back from ultimate solidarity with us in our suffering, never failing to hold out the ultimate hope of resurrection - of renewal from the ashes.