

# Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 23 March 2025 - The Third Sunday of Lent

**Lectionary Readings** (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Isaiah 55.1-9; Psalm 63.1-9; I Corinthians 10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9

## Homily

**Today's homily has been written by Revd Iain Osborne, Senior Chaplain and Strategy Advisor to the Acting Bishop of Ely**

*“Do you think they suffered because they were worse sinners than everyone else?” (Lk 13:2)*

“Why suffering?” is one of the most potent questions of our day. Philosophers have philosophised, and people have all sort of personal theories. Some say that God causes suffering so as to teach us a lesson; some, that it's the Devil's fault; or that we broke the world ourselves, and so the suffering is our own fault; or that lightning strikes at random.

The desire for an answer to suffering is related to the idea that religion is about finding answers to imponderable questions. First, our culture seems to say, I want to have my own existence explained to me; and then I will consider God's claims. But this is the wrong way around. Because without a loving relationship of trust, we cannot pose the questions aright, and cannot really understand the answers. How can I expect to understand the mystery of suffering, if I do not know the basics of my own existence: where I come from, the ground of my being, the purpose of my life?

Some people are only prepared to believe in a God who personally ensures that nothing bad ever happens to them, individually. Like Jeeves the butler, who clears up all the messes that Bertie Wooster finds himself in. Such a God quite obviously does not exist. I hope this does not shock anyone – but since we believe that Jesus Himself suffered greatly, the absence of a celestial Jeeves is surely obvious. It's important to say this, because some people believe that Christians do believe in that kind of God, and therefore think we are idiots for believing in something so evidently untrue.

In any case, to put human questions in the centre of the picture in this way is not really the model of faith that we see in the Bible or in Christian tradition. If we want to think about suffering, we do better to turn away from our own theories and pay attention to what the Bible has to say about the matter. Today's Gospel reading is part of that, but first let's remind ourselves of two other key texts.

The first is the Book of Genesis, and its story of the first sin. The Sunday-school version of this is that this portrays something called The Fall, which is the reason why everything has gone wrong in the world. But I recommend that you read Gen. 3 for yourself, because it doesn't really say anything of the kind. What you'll find in Gen. 3 is an explanation for some

very particular human experiences: sexual desire, the pain of childbirth, mortality, the effort required for productive work. Some of these involve suffering, others are surely neutral or indeed positive aspects to life. The actual theme of the Fall story is in fact the arrival of sin in the world. But the reason for sin and the reason for suffering are different questions – the relationship between the two being exactly what we are wondering about. The Fall as an explanation of suffering is an invention of Christians, but it's not so obvious that it's in the Bible.

The most important Bible text about suffering is the book of Job. This is a wonderful, poetic book that dramatizes questions of suffering in a story about a man who has bad experiences and wants to know why. Actually, the narrative doesn't really explain anything, it just demolishes pseudo-explanations. One by one, the philosophical theories about suffering are brought forward, and shown up as nonsense. In the end, God Himself speaks to Job and essentially says: if I told you why you suffer, you couldn't understand the answer. You don't know the first thing about how the world works – you don't even understand yourself, let alone what it feels like to be a mountain or a sea-monster. You don't, God says to Job, have the mental equipment to process the question, or to understand the answer.

Interestingly, some modern thinkers have come to the same conclusion, from the perspective of evolutionary anthropology. They suggest that our brains evolved to help us locate the bushes with the best berries, and to avoid being eaten by lions. So, what makes us believe these brains are likely to be fit so as to process the almost infinitely complex networks of cause and effects that make up reality, so as to boil it all down into a simple "Why"?

Let's come, third, to today's Gospel, in which Jesus is asked: did these people suffer because they were worse sinners than everyone else?

Jesus first gives a straight answer: NO. This is pastorally important. When someone is suffering, the last thing they need is to have someone tell them that they have brought it on themselves. Perhaps they have, in fact, but perhaps they haven't. People do not always seem to get what they deserve. In this case, it is surely true that the Galileans who were horribly killed by the Roman ruler died as a result of Pilate's sin, not their own.

But having dealt with that, Jesus immediately put his audience into question, personally. He is simply not willing to have an abstract metaphysical conversation. Any conversation with Jesus goes straight to the question: where do you stand and how must you change? "Unless you repent..."

And this, ultimately, is perhaps what this passage has for us. Not an answer to some grand metaphysical dilemma, but a challenge. Are the things happening to us an invitation to turn back to God? Are they the shock we need? An invitation to recognise the limits to how much we can control our own lives? Where do we stand with God?

And, finally, that little story about the fig tree. Like so many of Jesus' stories, it seems quite cute until we start to think about it – and then we realise that it has a very sharp edge. Not only are we invited to consider our relationship with God - to review what fruit we bear - and to repent... But also, time is short. If not now, then when? For what are we waiting?

### ***Ways to Engage all Generations***

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

In this case, you might want to focus on the story of the fig tree and ask some 'wondering questions' to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week. These may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder why the man told the gardener to cut the tree down?
- I wonder how the gardener felt?
- I wonder how you feel about the tree?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what we might think the tree could be like in our lives?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

### ***Suggested intercessions***

- For people who are suffering from physical illness, from mental illness, from despair or loneliness.
- For people who suffer because of others' sin. For civilians caught up in war; people who are abused; people who suffer from poverty or neglect.
- That all may hear the call to repent, while there is time left to them. For people close to death.
- For people who get lost in or confused by philosophical questions, that they might find their way to God.
- For the church's teaching ministry, that we might present the Gospel of Jesus with clarity and force.

### ***Suggested hymns/songs***

When I Survey

It is Well with my Soul

Be Still my Soul

Be Thou My Vision

Great is Thy Faithfulness

Blessed be Your Name (Redman)

### **Activities to accompany the service**

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>  
(weekly@ lectionary resource)