

# FINDING OUR WAY

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University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford  
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*(Preceded by these readings: Luke 13: 1-9 and Isaiah 55: 1-9. See last page below.)*

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

Good morning. It's wonderful to be back here at St Mary's having been studying for my doctorate at Boston University.

At first glance, today's readings are very challenging. However, after careful reflection I have actually taken enormous comfort from them. So often people have said to me that God cannot exist because inexplicable, terrible things occur in the world: As my teenagers would say " 'stuff' happens". For example, when innocent lives are taken by a terrorist act or thousands of people are washed away to their death in a natural disaster, where is God? How are we to respond to such tragedies?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus responds to such a question. He understands that it is part of the life to suffer inexplicable injustices but that our way to respond to them is to turn towards God – to repent -- and live in love with what He would term the fruits of the spirit. This would illustrate God's way of responding to disaster, not the human way of anger, hurt and disappointment. As Isaiah points out, God says "my ways are different from yours".<sup>1</sup>

While preparing this sermon, I was transported back to my childhood. When I

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55: 8, NIV

was 11 years old, our family was in an inexplicable catastrophe, which came out of the blue and changed our lives forever. A drunk driver smashed into our car on a windy Sussex road one late afternoon. My parents' lives fortunately were saved, because they were wearing seat belts. But from that day on my father could never run again, and both my parents had to spend a long summer in hospital recovering from serious injuries.

During that summer, I learnt two things:

1) Bad 'stuff' happens, out of the blue for no apparent reason, to innocent people, and can change their lives forever. Many of us experience tragedies that seems unfair such as terminal illnesses, tragic deaths, and heartbreak.

2) But then I received the literal and metaphorical fruits of the spirit through the love of "Ma Parks", my mother's best friend. Through her Christian love for my brother and me, we took the first step towards healing. I think about that summer a lot.

So our car crash what is my personal example of an inexplicable injustice. The summer following the crash was an example of how living in God's way, we children began to see the power of love. My elder brother and I were sent to live in Ma Parks's cottage in Dulwich, Suffolk while my parents were recovering. She was a deeply Christian person and my brother and I spent that summer with her. She had children who were our own age and we had a blissful time swimming, surfing and walking along the beach. Ma Parks' garden was filled with fig trees and I used to spend each day climbing into its branches to sit up high and eat the sweet fruit of the tree. With a ripe fig, you can gently unreel the thick, soft, purplish back and suck out the seeds. I found my sanctuary in that tree. It was my safe and secure place, and enabled me to

process what was going on in my little head and heart. So, while physically I was finding solace and peace by the sweet fruit of the fig tree, metaphorically I was healing under the umbrella of Ma Parks' love for me, which was unconditional and expressive of love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Therefore, I was not surprised when Jesus uses the fig tree in his parable as a symbol for us, and our need to celebrate the fruits of the tree to signify the fruit of repentance and the spirit of Christian lives. Let me expand on that a little as this is not an easy passage from Luke.

To begin with, Jesus is presented with two incidents of horrific calamities, much like my parents' car crash. And in that case, innocents lost their lives. One was an instance of Pilate's ordering the slaughter of Galileans while at worship in Jerusalem. This is what is meant by, "their blood was mingled with the blood of their sacrifices". The second one was a random accident, when the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell down and crushed eighteen people. The victims in each case had no idea what was coming. These people were innocent but tragedy occurred, just like the innocent people who, last week, were caught in the mass shooting in a mosque in New Zealand, or those washed away in the cyclone in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

These tragedies show us that life is fragile and that these victims were no better or worse than anyone else. So, Jesus' point is that death can come at any time. One can experience inexplicable tragedy at any time. Therefore, Jesus is concerned that his followers are prepared for such an eventuality. He wants them to be prepared and therefore be in a constant correct relationship with God.

In this passage, Jesus's reference to death is not so much a physical one as

much a metaphorical one; death being an absence of connectedness to God and an understanding of His way. So what then is His way? And are we walking but in God's path?

On the surface, the urgency, directness and uncompromising nature of Jesus' language in the gospel passage is arresting, He seems to presenting a message of repentance or perish is very stark and exacting.

One of my favourite theologians, Marcus Borg, in his book The Heart of Christianity<sup>2</sup> contextualises Jesus's words of repentance and death. "In the Hebrew Bible, repent means primarily to return to God...to repent means to return from exile...to reconnect with God." And in the New Testament, Borg says that it has an additional nuance of meaning. The Greek roots of the word means to go beyond the mind that you have -- "to go beyond the mind shaped by culture to the mind you have in Christ."

For Borg, "repentance is the path of reconnection, the path of transformation, the path of being born again, the path of dying and rising, the path of response to the messages of the kingdom of God." According to Borg, "the problem is not simply that we had been bad and rebelled against God (though that may be true), but that we are blind, estranged, lost in exile, self centred, wounded, sick, paralysed, in bondage, grasping and so forth."

In light of this understanding of repentance perhaps we can look at inexplicable tragedy as an opportunity to question whether we are truly living in the way that God demands of us. Jesus helps his disciples unpack this concept by the telling of the parable of the fig tree.

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, M. (2014). The Heart of Christianity. HarperCollins.

In the parable, the gardener, (Jesus) pleads with the vineyard owner (God) to just give him one more year so that he can nourish, till and water the vine to try to coax good fruits out of it. The gardener asks for this to make sure that his message is not only delivered but properly understood. The gardener wants his vine (followers) to understand the power and fruit of repentance. To understand that those who have seen the new way and are walking the right path, in the fruit of the spirit, will always be in good connection with God.

Therefore, we understand that the fruits know how to fold. In this parable they represent the fruit of repentance which will in turn produce the fruit of the spirit. Jesus knows that despite the calamity, uncertainty and discord present in our lives, by repentance and faith, supported and nurtured by His teachings, we as the vines can flower and can give fruit and do God's work in this world and spread his love.

There is little doubt that the world feels like a very scary place right now. Like probably many of you, I've had a creeping sense of despair and frustration over many events and instances including Brexit, the bombardment of Presidential tweets, Paris riots, and the rise of right wing extremism and environmental degradation, in many parts of the world. It seems like we have lost our way and are running out of time. In order to navigate this space, we must repent, lock into the mindset of God's ways and return to establishing the right relationship with him. We are all 'travel sore and weak'. So what is necessary is a change of heart. This is not easy but what we see in the world is a consequence of not following God's way.

One of my favourite poem's is Christina Rossetti's 'Up-Hill'<sup>3</sup> , Rossetti

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<sup>3</sup> Poetry Foundation, Up-Hill by Christina Rossetti. [https:// www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45002/up-hill](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45002/up-hill).

writes,

*Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.*

*Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend.*

*But is there for the night a resting place?  
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.*

*May not the darkness hide from my face?  
You cannot miss that inn."*

The journey, a new way, is the prominent symbol in this poem, and is open to a few different interpretations. One of the interpretations is that the poem symbolises the journey from birth to death. The darkening sky foreshadows the end of life, and the inn represents the final resting place. Considering Rossetti's religious background, this final resting place could be interpreted as Heaven. The road takes on several meanings, each revealing a facet of Rossetti's contemplation of life and its hardships. Despite life being "Uphill", consisting of inexplicable difficulties, related to her personal tragedies, she gains hope from her faith and turning to God and knowing that there is a safe inn to rest in.

Today for us, in times of darkness and distress, the 'inn' can also represent the place of warmth, comfort and hope, which is what we will find in Jesus. The fact that there is hope in that inn is a certainty which as Christians we must hold on too. It is similar to the joy we see on Easter morn after the darkness of Good Friday. Just as I felt secure in the branches of my fig tree, in the healing love of Ma Parks warmth, we can find our security in looking and acting in the world, in the ways of God, not man.

During the time of Lent, we are given time to step back, pray and ponder the daily rhythm of our lives as well as how we express and weave our spirituality and faith in them. And the questions we need to then ask is: Are we bearing fruit for God's kingdom? And what do the fruits of our faith look like? What would need to be growing on the tree for the owner of the vineyard to let it keep standing? How can we extract the sweetness and tenderness of the fig which I held in Suffolk and share it around? Of course, Paul's letter to the Galatians gives us a good definition of those fruits.<sup>4</sup>

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Can we need ask ourselves, "What fruit am I bearing for the Lord?" Am I showing love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and/or self-control? Am I showing the beauty of my faith? There are the internal characteristics, but what about the external manifestations of that fruit? Ministry to others? Are you bearing fruit in furthering the Kingdom of God? This means that we care about other people, and we want good things in their lives as well. Sometimes, that might be opposite of what we feel like doing. But if we are truly connected to Christ, their fruits grow naturally, and they help others.

Then again, this as a parable is a reminder of how easy it is for hatred to proliferate and explode and shows how fragile our lives have always been. Tragedy and hardship have their ways of nudging people toward God, but these verses suggest that tragedy and hardship come so suddenly, that they often mark the end, not the beginning, of our opportunities to live lives inclined towards God.

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<sup>4</sup> Galatians 5: 22-24 NIV

So, to conclude, let us use this Lenten season to examine ourselves in the sight of God and experience the liberating presence of repentance and the new life it brings. We as adults get so caught up in the complex challenges, tragedies and concerns of life. We are often blind, estranged and in exile, but as a child all I needed was the quiet intense faith of Ma Parks and the fig tree to treasure its fruits and to make sense of what was happening in the world i.e. restore my sight, open my heart and receive reassurance that despite the calamity and tragedy around, God's ways was present. Through faith, I felt His reassurance.

I want to end with the last two couplets of Christina Rossetti's poem. If we bear fruit there will be a resting place for us all, in heaven as on earth and a secure place to lay our heads.

*Shall I find comfort, travel sore and weak?  
Of labour you shall find the sum.*

*Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
Yea, beds for all who come.*

Amen.



### **Luke 13: 1-9**

*At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans who Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God. Jesus answered them, "Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will die as they did. What about those eighteen people in Siloam who were killed when the tower fell on them? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the people living in Jerusalem? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did."*

*Then Jesus tied them this parable: "There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. So he said to his gardener, 'Look for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig-tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?'. But the gardener answered, 'Leave it alone, Sir, just one more year; I will dig round it and put in some manure. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.'"*

### **Isaiah 55: 1-9**

*The LORD says, "Come, everyone who is thirsty — here is water! Come, you that have no money — buy grain and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk — it will cost you nothing! Why spend money on what does not satisfy? Why spend your wages and still be hungry? Listen to me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all.*

*"Listen now, my people, and come to me; come to me, and you will have life! I will make a lasting covenant with you and give you the blessings I promised to David. I made him a leader and commander of nations, and through him I showed them my power. Now you will summon foreign nations; at one time they did not know you, but now they will come running to join you! I, the LORD your God, the holy God of Israel, will make all this happen; I will give you honour and glory." Turn to the LORD and pray to him, now that he is near. Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking. Let them turn to the LORD, our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive. "My thoughts," says the LORD, "are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.*