

**24 March 2019**

**Isaiah 55.1-9**

**Luke 13.1-9**

## **The strange ways of God**

I was listening to a phone in programme on Radio 5 Live on Friday morning, reflecting on the Brexit debate. The most common sentiment shared by those phoning in was “What a mess!”

We are in unprecedented times, and all of the expert pundits who normally have a bit of a handle on these things, just do not know what to predict.

‘What a mess!’ seems to be the consensus feeling.

Talking of a mess, did you hear about the man in the news this week, who was rather puzzled because he kept finding things that he had left on his bench in the shed, tidied into a plastic container the next morning?

To start with he thought he was imagining it. But then he started leaving things out on purpose ... only to find that the next morning they had been tidied away into the container.

Who or what was doing this? With the help of a friend, he set up a camera overnight, and this is what he found:

*Video of mouse tidying bench*

It was a mouse, apparently with a need to keep things tidy!

Now, I know that we are all very different when it comes to how tidily we live.

Many teenagers don't have a wardrobe in their room, they have a floodrobe.

Confronted with a mess, many of us have an instinct to want to tidy things up.

Now, we are on a wide spectrum of this, but I think that many of us like things to be ordered, neat and tidy.

And I suspect that for many of us, what we look for from God is that he is going to bring just a little bit more order to our messy world.

Surely, part of God's job, is to bring some sort of order to the chaotic mess of our lives?

But there is a problem ... because in our desire to see God bring order into our world, time and again we are tempted to make God altogether neater and altogether tidier than he is.

Our compulsion to find neat, tidy and easy solutions to the problems we face in the world sometimes means that we project onto God a neatness and a tidiness that is far from his nature.

For example, one very orderly way to think about God's relationship with this world is to think of God as someone who deals with everyone according to what they deserve.

In this way of thinking about the world everything that we do, think or say will have a consequence for our relationship with God either for good or for ill. Like a bank account, our standing with God will either be going up or down, into the black or into the red depending on how well we are doing.

And more than that, there will be consequences for our actions. Favourable behaviour will earn blessings; unfavourable behaviour will require some form of sanction.

This is a neat and tidy way of looking at the world. It is logical. As long as we know what God requires of us, everyone knows where they stand.

However, the problem is that we all know that life is much messier than that!

And I think I want to say that God is messier than that! ... but in a creatively good way!

The problem with that way of thinking is that, however hard we try, there is no obvious and consistent correlation between the good and bad things that happen to people and the way people have behaved.

It simply is not true that the wicked of the world endure greater suffering than the good of the world.

We kind of know this, but the neatness of this solution to the messiness of the world has a kind of magnetic attraction for us.

And whenever religious people, both Christian and non-Christian, have tried to force this world-view onto people, it has had a devastating impact on people's lives.

- people enduring suffering – whether through tragedy, disability, illness or the cruelty of others – have been made to think that in some way this suffering is 'deserved' ... and far from being victims they are somehow responsible for their own suffering
- people have looked on others and their suffering, and assumed that this is a judgment of God on them and so have excluded them, avoided them or looked down on them
- and the world-view is so deeply ingrained, that even in our secular world, people can find themselves thinking to themselves when confronted with tragedy, 'What have I done to deserve this?'

Jesus himself confronts this false picture of God in Luke 13.1-5.

Jesus was asked to comment on an atrocity in which the Roman governor Pilate had had some Galileans executed. But it was not enough for Pilate to have them killed. He went even further and desecrated them and the temple by mixing their blood with the blood of sacrifices and having it offered at the temple.

Jesus used this incident to challenge bad, simplistic theology.

If you think this is what God is like – that people suffer because they have offended God – does this mean that these Galileans were worse sinners than everyone else?

And Jesus' answer to his own question was a simple and resounding 'No!'

Now probably most people would have agreed with Jesus on this point. It probably wouldn't have occurred to them that this had happened because they were more sinful than others ... because they probably had some work around for those who are martyrs and suffer innocently for a righteous cause.

But then Jesus turns to another tragedy that everyone was talking about.

A tower had fallen in Siloam, and eighteen people had been crushed by the falling masonry. And Jesus asks again – "Were these more guilty than others living in Jerusalem?"

- Did this happen because they deserved it, and somehow God had singled them out for punishment?

And again, Jesus answers very clearly, 'No!'

Jesus puts the innocent victims of atrocities and the victims of accidental tragedies on exactly the same footing.

He doesn't begin to explore why these things happen. But he does make it very clear that God is not at work in these incidents, meting out his punishment to those who deserve it.

The world is messier than that! This is not what God is like.

And the world is the same today as it was then – messy, unpredictable and unfair.

In the past two weeks we have witnessed the atrocity of the worshippers in the mosque in Christchurch being gunned down by a far right extremist, and during this past week we have witnessed the natural disaster of cyclone Idai devastating areas of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe, with large numbers of casualties.

And there are no easy answers, no neat solutions, no tidy explanations. We are faced with totally undeserved suffering.

And the neat solution that tries to correlate suffering with sin quite simply does God an injustice. Jesus rejects it; and we must reject it.

And Jesus goes on to hint at why the world is messier than we would like it to be in this strange almost unfinished story about the fig tree. (It's unfinished because we don't know what the fate of the fig tree is.)

What Jesus is pointing out in this story is that God isn't only at work in the world punishing mistakes and rewarding good behaviour – indeed even if he is at work in the world like this. But God is also at work in the world giving second, third, fourth chances – offering opportunities for change and transformation. Encouraging fruitfulness.

And our Old Testament reading reinforces this for us. If our New Testament passage addresses the mystery of undeserved suffering, the Old Testament passage addresses the mystery of undeserved mercy.

The prophet Isaiah of Babylon is speaking to the people of Israel who have found themselves in exile in Babylon. They know that they as a people have been unfaithful to God in the past. They had not stood for justice. They had not protected the stranger and the alien. They had colluded with corruption. Their worship of God was a formality, with no substance in their daily living. And so they believed that their present situation was punishment from God.

Isaiah of Babylon certainly wants the people to take responsibility for their past, and to recognise their failures. As an addict has to recognise the folly of their lifestyle and take ownership of their behaviour in order to find a way out of their downward spiral, so the people of God needed to take ownership of their actions and to begin living out faith they professed.

But what Isaiah offers as the way out of their mess is not just a reiteration of a worn out record that God punishes sins and rewards good behaviour, but the promise of God's undeserved mercy on those who have messed up.

And this is what is on offer in Isaiah 55.

Here is an offer of water to the thirsty and of food to the hungry.

But more than that, the banquet is offered as a gift to those who are destitute – those who have nothing to give for it;

- those who cannot pay for it;
- those who cannot work for it;
- it is just totally undeserved and unconditional, no-strings-attached gift.

‘Listen, listen to me and eat what is good,  
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.’

They find themselves in a mess ... and indeed a mess that is in part of their own making. And God's response is one of undeserved mercy and graciousness.

And this undeserved mercy, breaks through the mess of our lives and offers us a pathway into a transformed world. But it is not the neat and easy, logical solution.

It is almost as if God himself is breaking all of the rules of justice and fairness in this offer of mercy and forgiveness. He is certainly breaking apart our neat and easy solutions of how the world works and simplistic ideas of good and evil, blessing and punishment.

Which is why Isaiah talks about the strange ways of God –

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.

As the heavens are higher than the earth  
so are my ways higher than your ways,  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

We too easily try to force God into our very neat and tidy categories to try to make sense of the world. But God is forever breaking loose of those narrow expectations of what it is to be God.

He calls us to think differently about who he is, and so to act differently in the world – to turn to him and to take on his strange, sometimes chaotic ways of forgiveness and mercy and justice, that, far from bringing order, will sometimes throw our lives up into the air and make them even more unpredictable.

But notice how both of these passages call us to repentance.

Isaiah 55.6-7

“Seek the Lord while he may be found;  
call on him while he is near.  
Let the wicked forsake his ways  
and the evil man his thoughts.  
Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him,  
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

Luke 13.3 and again in 5 – Jesus warns his listeners, confronted with the mystery of undeserved suffering in the world

“Unless you repent, you will all perish.”

Are we back with this neat and narrow, moralistic God?

I don't think so.

God does call us to be deeply reflective and to let go of everything that becomes a barrier in our lives to having a rich relationship with him.

But repentance is so much more than feelings of remorse for what we have done wrong. It is a realignment of our lives so that we walk in step with God.

And this realignment cannot just be about thinking again about our words and actions, it has to be re-learning who God is, and falling into step with the extraordinary rhythm of God's life.

It is about letting go of all of the ways in which we put God into a neat and tidy box of moral gate-keeper in the world, and allowing him to define himself for us, and to define who we can be in harmony with him.

The journey of repentance in Lent should not simply be thinking about how we have gone wrong in our lives, but also reflecting deeply on how we have got God wrong and keep getting God wrong – putting God into a neat and tidy box that we can control. Rather than letting God be God in the extraordinarily generous and transformative way that God wants to be God in our world and in our lives.

It is about learning the strange ways of the God of undeserved mercy and grace who blows our world open with his generosity and with his capacity to transform.