

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

On 14 June 2017, a fire broke out in the 24-storey Grenfell Tower block of flats in North Kensington, London, it caused 72 deaths, More than 70 others were injured and, thank God, 223 people escaped. It was the deadliest structural fire in the United Kingdom since the 1988 Piper Alpha oil rig disaster and the worst UK residential fire since the Second World War. We are told that lessons will be learnt by these disasters but are lessons ever learnt. In our Gospel reading we hear how 18 people had died in a tower and that was 2000 years ago, I wonder, will we ever get to the stage where we don't have harsh lessons to learn?

Lent is a time to take stock, to take step back and consider our own personal faith.

The Gospel reading today has, for me three points: firstly Galileans (regional people) who were killed, secondly, people in the Siloam tower who died when the tower collapsed (city folk) and lastly, a parable about a fig tree.

Lent is a good time to take a reading such as this and go into more depth than we normally would. We won't go into too much detail this morning as 7 minutes will not do it justice but please take your pew sheet home and re read it in the days ahead...let me know if it brings any revelations to you.

The reading has a gory start... it was reported to Jesus that Pilate had had some Galileans killed and it appears that they were killed whilst giving their sacrifices to God.

At this time Jesus was in Jerusalem but he had spent a lot of time in the region of Galilee, most of his disciples came from that area. It doesn't say whether the Galileans had come to Jerusalem to worship or whether it had happened in a local synagogue, Either way they were somewhere where they should have been safe and yet the Roman soldiers killed them.

To the Jews in Jerusalem, this was newsworthy, but Galilee was way down on the coast, it probably seemed distant to them.

Today, this episode brings home to us just what dangerous times Jesus was living in, Roman occupation was not just there in the background it was present and threatening in a way we in 21st century Hertfordshire cannot even begin to imagine. Historical records of the time report that Pilate was capable of great brutality. In a letter to Caligula, Agrippa the First called Pilate "inflexible, merciless, and obstinate" and accused him of inflicting punishment without trial and many acts of cruelty.

The next tragedy was closer to home, it happened in Jerusalem, the tower of Siloam collapsed killing 18 people. Siloam is a district of the city, known for the healing pool where Jesus restored the sight of the blind man in John 9. Was it a tower block like Grenville? a place where people lived, and consequently should have felt safe and secure, or was it perhaps a water tower or some other large structure which fell down?

When asked if the people affected had sinned, Jesus gives the same response to both events.

Unless you repent you will not be saved. He reassures us that an early death was not the result of sinning but things that happen unexpectedly, and that we must be ready, it is never too late to turn to him. If they don't repent, they will perish, but if they do repent, God will forgive—will save them. These are harsh words, particularly for us Anglicans who, on the whole, prefer a cosy santasitised faith We need to live lives of repentance, because we never know when we will die. Either through old age, illness, accident or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus tells us that neither the Galileans who were killed by Pilate nor the eighteen who were crushed by the tower had the opportunity to repent. Their end came swiftly—without warning. So it may be for us. Repentance helps us in life, it helps us to face death without fear.

Sometimes people suffer more at the death of a loved one, through guilt, because they believe, in some way that they caused it.

In more coherent moments we all know that tragedy sometimes strikes randomly as it did in the case of the Galileans and the eighteen Jerusalemites. In such cases, it has nothing to do with guilt.

On the other hand, sin sometimes leads to tragedy for example Drunk drivers or drivers distracted by their mobile phones have killed innocent people and abusive people will injure their spouses and children physically and/ or mentally.

However, having a relationship with Jesus can prepare us to be strong in the face of tragedy, and it also prepares us for death, because we can know that one day we will be with him in heaven.

Our Gospel reading then moves to the story of the fig tree. We read:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

Throughout the Old Testament, a vineyard is a common metaphor for the people of Israel and Adam and Eve dressed themselves in fig leaves. Jesus' listeners would have understood this connection as Jesus told the parable. Fig trees were commonly planted amongst the vines.

We can interpret this parable as God being the landowner and Jesus the Gardener.

We read that for 3 years the landowner has been looking for fruit and found none. The three years could be a reference to Jesus' earthly ministry. The landowner becomes impatient and tells the gardener not to spend any more time on the tree but to cut it down.

The gardener replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. **9** If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down'.

The plea is to give the tree just one more season—one more chance. Yes, three years is a long time, plenty of time for the tree to bear fruit. However, the owner has three years invested. One more year will not break the bank. The payoff could be a fruitful tree in only one year—a significant gain for one year's patience. The gardener nurtured the tree. He does not want to lose it.

The gardener, if the landowner agrees to leave the tree another year, will not leave the tree's salvation to chance. He will loosen the soil to ensure that water finds its way to the roots. He will fertilize the tree with manure. If the tree bears fruit it will be work of the gardener that saves it. This is Good News! Jesus does not want to condemn us he wants to give us every opportunity to turn to him.

The story ends without telling us whether the owner accepts the gardener's offer, but Jesus leaves us with the notion that he does.

Jesus is the God of second chances.

So, We have heard today of tragedy and reprieve, of disaster and salvation and it is fitting that during Lent we are tested with difficult passages to read. The challenge in the week ahead is to reread this passage and consider how perhaps you should react to it.

For me already I know I need to take more time in prayer than I have been doing, it's so easy to cut back or stop when the busyness of the world around you takes over. So this Lent I pray that you will find time to consider and perhaps with me, make changes too.

Amen