

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday February 4th 2006 Luke 13:1-9

If there is one thing this media-driven world of ours gives us it is news and information to saturation point. And most of it is soul-destroying – bombs in Baghdad, tornadoes, bird flu... But we have always had bad news of tragedies and natural disasters. In this passage Jesus receives breaking news of some Galileans who had been brutally murdered as they worshipped. The people probably wanted to find out where He stood on the Roman question – was He a Zealot or a pacifist? Was there a connection between suffering and sin, as the Pharisees maintained?

Jesus is unpredictable. He does not go into theological debate but asks a question – do you think the people who died were worse sinners? No! Were those who were killed when the tower collapsed more sinful? No! These things just happen! Oh, and by the way, unless you too repent you too will perish. This is not the best post-trauma counselling, but it is necessary to say it. When we try to engage in debates, we put ourselves in the best possible light, on order to let ourselves off the hook. Solzhenitsyn writes 'the battle lines between good and evil run not through nations, or communities, but right through every human hearts.' So before we start a moral debate, we must look into our own hearts. To this end, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree.

In the first three years of the fig-tree's life it is forbidden in Jewish law to pick any fruit. But when the man went to pick the fruit in the 4th, 5th and 6th years, there was no fruit on the tree. Jesus actually uses the fig-tree as a picture of Israel and her fruitlessness. There was much religion going on, it was very popular, but no fruit was in evidence, and if there is no fruit there is little point in it. The fruit needs to be produced in keeping with repentance, and the fact that the Jewish people are Abraham's children has no bearing on it. So it doesn't matter what denominational tag you have, what office you hold in the church, if, for example, you harbour bitterness or resort to gossip or pornography, there is no point to your religion.

The reply of the vine-dresser was to leave the fig-tree alone, to dig around, and fertilise it, to give it another year. This would have echoes of the well-known story at that time of Ahikar who tells his wayward son that he is like the palm-tree beside a river that cast its fruit in to the river. The owner decided to cut it down. The tree complained, offering to produce carobs if given one more year. The owner replies if you have not been industrious in producing your own fruit how can you be industrious in producing what is not your own fruit? And so he refuses to give it one more year.

Not so with Jesus. In His parable the fig-tree is indeed given one more year. Judgement requires that the tree be dug out, but mercy appeals for more grace, and God gives it – He wants us to return.

And it is not that Jesus is the merciful one fending off an angry God, no, even in the OT book of Hosea we see the mercy of God: in the beginning the first fruit of the fig tree here are a symbol of a pure, innocent and responsive Israel. But later the fig tree is blighted because of Israel's idolatry. God will judge them, but even in the midst of that, a cry of love escapes from his mouth – 'How can I give them up?'

When David chose the 3 days of plague as his judgement for taking the census (2 Samuel 24:14), which was from the Lord himself, he understood that God's mercy might be severe but that it was still mercy.

This phrase 'leave it one more year' ought to wake us up – that it is never too late to lay hold of the mercy of God. If you hear His voice it is a sign that God is still working on the soil of your heart, so take hold of what He offers – His grace.