

*St. Alban's Epping, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2019*

### **“RECOGNIZING THE BIGGER PICTURE”**

**(Genesis 15:1-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:1-9)**

A modern near-new plane takes off from Addis Ababa Airport. Six minutes later it crashes, killing all 157 people on board: people from different countries with many different stories. Why did it happen? Was it the plane? Was it the pilot? Is there some other explanation? Investigations are already under way on these things.

But many will be asking the same question – why? - from a different perspective. Why did God let it happen? Perhaps even why did God make it happen? These questions may well be asked by people of faith trying to make sense of this terrible calamity. Why did my loved one have to die? Why did good people on the way to do good things die in this terrible way? It is a natural question for people of faith to ask.

But it is rarely a question which leads to a clear answer, and it can often lead to more tears, more frustration. Things like this do happen in a world where things go wrong, a world where people have gone wrong. Yes, God is still ruler over the world: he is in charge. But I don't believe we are to think of him looking around for people he can pick out to do nasty things to, just because he can!

The more helpful question to be asking in these circumstances is “What? or How? What do I do in these circumstances? How do I respond to this situation? What does God want me to do from here?”.....

Jesus and his disciples were travelling to Jerusalem from their home district of Galilee, up to the north. By this time, they had learnt that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised King and Saviour of God's people. But Jesus was also trying to get them to understand that being Messiah would be difficult and painful: it would not be one glorious triumph after another.

Someone now comes along and tells them of the massacre of a group of Galileans in Jerusalem by the troops of Pontius Pilate the Roman Governor, just as they were offering sacrifice in the temple. Pilate believed that Galilee was a hotbed of resistance, and he may have suspected these people of being up to no good. He was always prepared to use brutal means to deal with those he thought were a danger. And apparently this is one example.

I guess that news didn't make the disciples feel too comfortable. After all, they were a group of Galileans on the way to Jerusalem, with a leader whom Pilate might think was a threat! But other people might have been thinking: “Well, if those people died like that, they probably deserved it. Good things happen to people who are good; bad things happen to bad people.” That was a common way of looking at life in those days. The belief made their faith in God a more comfortable thing.

But what is “good”? Of course, we know that none of us is perfect: we all need God's forgiveness. But there are certainly people who live lives that are good by human standards. Indeed, God wants us to live good lives in that sense.

Jesus however is not going to hold a theological discussion on this issue. He simply points out that these victims of Pilate were no worse than any other group of people. God hadn't picked them out for some special punishment because they were particularly bad people.

Instead Jesus focuses on a much bigger picture. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” he says. What he is pointing out is that death comes to all of us. The death rate in Australia is exactly the same as it is in the poorest countries of the world: 100% of people die! And beyond that, Jesus is saying that God's judgement is for all people. No one will escape the reality of judgement day.

And so he warns his listeners of the importance of repenting. There is the blessing of eternal life for those who repent, but there is only hopeless death for those who refuse to repent.

And to underline the importance of all this, Jesus reminds his listeners of another recent event. A tower has collapsed in Jerusalem, killing eighteen people. Perhaps this was part of King Herod's great building program, and the eighteen may have been workmen working on the tower.

Regardless of that, it was a terrible thing to happen. But Jesus again says: “Do you think these people who were killed were worse than other people? No: things like this happen in this world where things go wrong, and where people go wrong. But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Judgement comes to us all: we must all be prepared for that judgement.

And what is repentance? Literally it is a **change of direction**, almost turning around. In this sense, repentance is the acknowledgement that we as humans live our lives turned away from God. And repentance is the decision to seek to live lives connected to God. Literally it is also a **change of mind**, a change of attitude, a change of outlook. Repentance means that I decide to live not just for myself, but I live as one of God's people, seeking to honour and serve him in my life. In this morning's baptism service, I will be asking little Evie and her sponsors: "Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you reject all selfish living, and all that is false and unjust? Do you renounce Satan and all evil?" A change of direction in life: that's what repentance is all about. But as the questions go on, we will be reminded that repentance is not just about what we reject, what we say no to. The next question is: "Will you strive to live as a disciple of Christ, loving God with your whole heart, and your neighbour as yourself, till your life's end?"

**Repentance** is about our direction in life, and it is about the way we actually live. True repentance comes out in the way we live and act. It means not seeking to live our selfish human way, but seeking to live God's way. It doesn't mean perfection, but it ought to be visible.

After saying these challenging things about repentance, Jesus went on to tell a story about a fig tree which would not bear fruit. The gardener asked the owner to be patient. "Give it more time: give it another year", he said. "OK", said the owner, "but if it still doesn't bear any fruit with more time and care and opportunity to develop, it will have to come down."

Jesus is still talking about the reality of judgement. God gives us plenty of time and opportunity to turn back to him, but sooner or later the time will come for judgement. And he wants us to be ready for that great and terrible day. We mustn't presume on God's patience. That is why Paul in our reading from Philippians warns against people who live as enemies of the cross of Christ: people who are caught up with the things they can see and touch and physically enjoy – people who are living for themselves. But there is something much more wonderful for those who are God's people. So Paul tells his readers, and ultimately he tells us, to "stand firm in the Lord", to keep living a life of repentance.

But there is more to repentance than trying to live a good life, than trying to be a good person.

There is another series of questions in the baptism service. "Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?" This is belief not just in theory, but faith that makes a difference. Faith is our humble trust in the God who is ready to forgive and welcome us into his family. It is recognizing that through Jesus' death on the cross, God's forgiveness is available to us, and therefore depending on God's amazing grace which comes to us through Christ. **Faith**: believing God's promises, and trusting in his faithfulness and love. Remember in our first reading how Abraham believed God's great promises to him, and we are told that it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Repentance linked with faith in the love and promises of God. That's what we need. Through that repentance and faith we are indeed God's beloved people, we are assured that on that great and terrible day we have forgiveness, and a warm welcome into God's magnificent eternal kingdom. But even now we are members of God's family, a family which should right now reflect the love and understanding and the patience of God. May we hear that call of Jesus to genuine repentance and faith.

Well, we will continue to hear of disasters, and of other terrible events – as we have indeed heard in the last few days. Sometimes bad things may happen to us. That is life in this world.

We may want to ask: why? That OK, it's natural. But let's go on to ask the important questions. How do I honour and serve and obey God in this situation? And of course, let us keep going in faith, as Jesus' disciples did. Repentance is expressed in a new life. Faith brings us a new relationship with God. Repentance and faith assure us of a new and eternal hope.

Through repentance and faith in Christ, and in what he has done for us, we have the assurance that God is with us now, and he is with us even when bad things happen. And he promises us a blessed place in his new creation where tears and pain and sorrow will be no more. May we all live this new life as true followers of Jesus. Amen.

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