



March 7th 2010- Sarah Donnelly
Text: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63; Luke 13:1-9
Using resources Feasting on the Word. Year C, Vol. 2. 2009.

May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in your sight O Lord,
our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Unlike the silk trees in the yards of two of our neighbours, ours has never bloomed lovely puffy pink blossoms in August – not in the 4 years since it was planted. It looks lovely in the front yard with its green leaves, but at a certain time in the summer, when our neighbours are enjoying the exquisite beauty of their silk trees, we look at our Charlie Brown tree and sigh. Last year I was thinking of talking to Bernie Dinter about this, and on a bad day I have even considered, if not cutting it down, at least transplanting it and purchasing another one, with the hope that a new tree might “bear some fruit” - or at least blossoms.

Before hearing this morning about another unfortunate tree – a fig tree - the gospel readings for both this Sunday and last Sunday begin with a report that tells Jesus and his friends about the hostile actions of the current government. Last week this group was told about Herod’s intention to kill Jesus. This week the group is told about Pilate killing Galileans as they worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem, and then mingling the blood of these Galileans with the blood reserved for making religious sacrifices in the temple. People are shocked to hear this news, and in their dismay they turn to their “knowledge of God” or the “theology” of the day. In the world of the Jews at the time of Jesus, it was widely believed that suffering was a punishment for sin. The scriptures that Jesus had been raised on would have reflected this way of thinking, and I would like to give you an example of the sort of “theology” that Jesus would have been steeped in. Now I don’t want to be simplistic or unfair about this, because the Hebrew Scriptures are complex and often beautiful and engaging like the passage that we heard this morning from the book of Isaiah. But the scriptures also reflect the theology of the author, and of the society. Just listen to this passage, which quotes Moses, from the book of Deuteronomy:

“But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-bowl.

Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle, and the issue of your flock.

Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.

The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you from the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. The sky over your head shall



be bronze, and the earth under you iron. The LORD will change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed." (Deut. 28:15-24)

I think it would be very hard for us to respond to hearing this passage being proclaimed in a church today with the words "Thanks be to God." Did you find yourself shrinking further down into the pew as you listened to these words? These are harsh words, reflecting a theological worldview that has almost shifted in our world today. I say "almost" because it still seems to linger in the backs of our minds, or in our subconscious, surfacing only when unbearable suffering enters our own life, or the life of someone we care about. Then in our grief and distress we might hear ourselves saying, "but she is only a child...she doesn't deserve this cancer" or "it just isn't fair; what did he do to deserve that?" Comments made to reflect our outrage at the injustice that is happening – to be sure – and that is just the point. As human beings we seem to need to make sense of suffering – justice must be done – and so we cry out with grief and fear and anger and confusion: what did I do to deserve this? Why me?

One of the biggest miracles in today's gospel and indeed in the life of Jesus - in my opinion - is not that a blind man is miraculously given his sight, or a child who is near death is healed, but that Jesus is able to move beyond the theology of his day. And in telling us about his understanding of God – his theology – Jesus gives us a great gift.

But we need to be careful here, because this gift is not cheap or easy. It is a gift that comes with an RSVP, and time is ticking.

"It is a serious mistake to put off repentance," says Jesus, "– respond positively to my message before it is too late. The violent deaths of the Galileans and the workers who were crushed by the tower at Siloam remind us of this." So do the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, our fellow parishioner Uli and his untimely death in 2007 when he was only 51 and the many other unexpected tragedies that are a part of our lives and our world.

Jesus is calling people to respond positively to his message before it is too late – not out of fear or because God is going to get us if we don't, but out of our longing and gratitude, and because when we take the time to honestly reflect on our lives, we know we can do better. Like John the Baptist, the Jesus in Luke's gospel is convinced that the end of the world as they knew it was coming soon, and that a dramatic reversal of fortunes will occur when the reign of God breaks in. "Time is short," say Jesus "– don't waste it. At the same time, remember who God is: one who is extravagant in mercy, who believes in us, and our ability to change and grow, and who gives us the grace we need in order that this transformation can take place within us."

This weekend many people are gathered at Synod making some very important decisions on our behalf. They are asking each other: which churches need to be pruned or cut down so that new life can be born? Which churches need to be nurtured and cared for so that they can grow as exciting, vibrant communities of faith? These are difficult questions and none of us can know the future with certainty. We walk with faith. Faith is taking your best step, and leaving the rest to God. And we must remember that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.





We cannot know for certain how our lives, guided by our faith, will make a difference in our world. The working out of God's kingdom is not ours to figure out. Our task is to continue to keep trying, keep bearing fruit, without having all the answers. We live in deep mystery. We act, react, ask for forgiveness and try again. We are generous, and then miserly, in our fear. We pray and then stop praying. We listen, and then stop listening. On a good day we take our best step and then leave the rest to God. We labour now for a future we are not meant to control. We do not pray 'My kingdom come, my will be done' - at least, we shouldn't. We do our best, as the gardener in the gospel proposes, watering and fertilizing, getting our hands dirty and soiling our knees and then we wait: wait to see how our efforts in growing this church will materialize, how our children and grandchildren will turn out, how our world responds to the overwhelming needs in Haiti and Chile and throughout the continent of Africa. It seems to always be a balance between working hard and waiting, committed action and then surrender. It never seems to get any easier, no matter how old we get, does it? But we are encouraged not to give up, and God does not give up on us either.

And as for our silk tree in our front yard – I think we will give it one more summer, and see how it does... Amen.

