



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church February 28, 2016

Luke 13: 1-9

One of the people who come to us for help is having a hard time – money pressures, health worries etc. He often says, “I can’t help wondering what I have done wrong to deserve all this”. That is a common cry of people who experience bad things in their lives – death and grief, illness, family breakdown. I am sure you have heard it from someone in your life. It is an attitude that speaks of an understanding of God as a dominant being of holiness and judgement. This is an understanding that reflects some of the Old Testament pictures of God; images that surface in some of the Psalms. Bad things are happening to me, I must have done something bad that offended God.

A worse expression of this idea is when someone outside looks at a life and says, “Something bad is happening to you, you must have done something bad.” Years ago, a visiting American evangelist claimed that the bushfires in Victoria were God’s punishment for allowing homosexuality. This sort of attitude is worse because it comes with the unspoken subtext, “you are a sinner, but I am not”. It is based in a similar image of a vengeful God, but twisted by a poor understanding of salvation and being right with God.

This idea of God – God is a god of punishment and retribution in this life; do something bad and God will punish you by making something bad happen in your life – seems to never go away. We hear these expressions in all parts of our lives. It is somehow endemic in our culture, despite the fact that the reading we heard today has Jesus directly refuting that idea of God; as he does in so many other places in the Gospels. And yet the idea persists to the point of being endemic. So endemic that we even have insurance companies giving themselves an out by declaring that some destructive, catastrophic event is ‘an act of God’. We even have people with no background in the church, but a loose idea of spirituality, co-opting the idea of karma from the Buddhists. Do something bad and karma will make sure that something bad happens to you. They have, of course, corrupted the Buddhist concept as well. Karma is meant to operate across incarnations and not within one life.

Maybe it’s an overactive sense of justice – evil must be addressed and wrongs avenged – but it’s not a rational interpretation of justice and it’s not a wholesome way to live. Many of you will have faced this attitude in your life, either as your own reaction to things happening to you or as the reaction of friends and colleagues to things happening to

others. One thing that today's Gospel says is that this idea of a vengeful God is definitely not a part of our faith. "Look at the death and destruction happening in those people's lives, they must be bad sinners", is exactly what is being said to Jesus in today's Gospel, and he says NO. He turns the whole comment back to front, "You think they are sinners, but death awaits you if you don't repent and turn to the God of life". God is not a god of vengeance and retribution; God is a god of grace and mercy. You have no basis on which to judge others, you only have your relationship with God. In another Gospel story, Jesus spoke of trying to take a speck of dust out of someone's eye while you have a piece of wood in your own. In another story Jesus answers those who wanted to know who sinned to make someone born blind by saying, "No one sinned; his blindness is an opportunity to show the God of grace and second chances".

Despite all that teaching, and the work of the Gospel and the church over millennia, the idea of a vengeful God is in our culture, but what do you say or how do you respond? Jesus rebuke to the gossipy people who come to him sounds a bit harsh to our ears, and certainly wouldn't be well received by someone who is suffering. But for those who are gossiping, the attitude of 'those people deserve what they got' is also harsh and maybe needs a sharp rebuke. Although taken literally, Jesus words still hold out the image of a vengeful God.

The parable that Jesus told is a better way. Our translations may split these passages with different headings, but Luke intended you to hear the parable as an added piece of teaching for both those who feel they are being punished and particularly for those who think God is punishing others. In Jesus, God is not a god of punishment, but a God of second chances; and more, a God of second chances with support. This is a parable of the Trinity if you don't get caught up in giggling at the metaphor. God, the vineyard owner, doesn't just agree to a second chance for the tree. Jesus, the gardener, offers to tend to the tree and adds the Spirit, the fertiliser, to give the tree a chance to thrive and bear fruit.

When you think to yourself, or you hear someone say, "What have I done to deserve this? I feel like I'm being punished", hear instead this parable of the God of second chances and support and tender care. You are in the hands of the gardener. This could easily have been a parable about a tree that is damaged by a storm. The owner may say, cut it down it is too damaged, but the gardener will say, give it another season, I'll tend it and feed it and it will produce fruit.

When you think to yourself, or hear someone say, "Those people must have done something bad to deserve that disaster", hear instead this parable of the God who calls for the fruit of love, mercy and kindness, and the offer of a second chance through repentance and the acceptance of the Spirit to build love and mercy and kindness. If the

parable were, as before, about a tree damaged in a storm, the outcome would be, as before, the same. You are in the hands of the gardener.

The fruit we are called to produce is a part of the answer to this attitude of a vengeful God. There is no point trying to proclaim a gracious God of second chances by getting angry at an attitude of punishment. We are in the hands of the gardener and fed by the Spirit, let us produce the fruits of grace and mercy to reflect our good God of second chances and support.