

Luke: Judgement, Repentance and Forgiveness

March takes us through Lent to Palm Sunday and into Holy Week. Jesus has “set his face towards Jerusalem” (9:51) and his Passion. Our readings are of judgement, the call to repentance and forgiveness, leading us directly to the message of Good Friday and the cross.

We begin with a conversation with the crowds. Was violent death a sign of sin, “were they worse sinners than all the others?” (13:2,4) Jesus gives an unequivocal negative, but ... announces the universal need for repentance. Judgement is a fact of life in God’s kingdom: “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did” (13:3,5), a difficult message for them, and us to hear. Is there no hope? Jesus completes his teaching with a parable – an unfruitful fig tree will be given one more chance, “if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down” (13:9). Will we make use of the opportunity offered?

Our next week’s reading is the much-loved “Prodigal Son”. Here is the son who does make use of the opportunity, and we are all invited to “celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (15:32). He is the fig tree who has produced fruit at the last.

But who are we? Do we feel one with the prodigal son, or are we actually in sympathy with the elder brother who finds his father’s forgiveness of his brother hard to take? It is the father, and not the brother who has been waiting and watching, “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion” (15:20). It is the father who “ran and put his arms around him and kissed him”(15:20). Twice, the father tells us that “this son of mine / this brother of yours was dead and is alive again” (15:23, 32). God, our father acts with forgiveness, often where it is lacking in ourselves.

On Palm Sunday we will hear the story of the Passion. As Jesus is hung on the cross we hear once more the words of the God who waits in sorrow, ready with his forgiveness: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34). The criminal, “condemned justly” for his misdemeanour, as he turns to Jesus is offered new life, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43).

And so, this month we hear of the justice of judgement, but also the good news that God is watching and waiting for our repentance, so that with joy he may extend the open arms of forgiveness. Luke’s gospel is a story of the “fellow who welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2). Do we?