

2025-03-23 ... 10am Morning Service Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Isaiah 55: 1 – 9; 1 Corinthians 10: 1 – 13; Luke 13: 1 - 9

Oh no!

My first thought on reading this morning's readings was Oh no! I even contemplated throwing a sickie and leaving it to Sue (Armstrong) to sort out!

God is good!

What do you do when you come across a passage that seems difficult, that seems to say something you don't want to hear?

I start by reminding myself about my core beliefs – that God is Good, that God is merciful and that God loves us.

I want to put a footnote in here – when I first wrote that sentence I wrote God is Good, he is merciful and he loves us I really don't want the picture that my words create to be of God as 'he' God is not a 'he' though we call God 'Father', and though Jesus's earthly appearance was as a man ... God is far beyond being a he a she or an it ... because of the limitations of our language this is difficult to get round but I try hard to make the pronoun I use for God to be God ... even though that can make for a clumsy sounding sentence – and often the 'he' we are used to hearing slips in!

So, back on track, I'm going to look for this core belief that God is good, that God is merciful and that God loves us in the readings – and there it is in **Isaiah verse 7**

***let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon***

and in that verse we hear the focus of this morning, heard throughout the Christian world by those who belong to churches which subscribe to the common liturgy, of repentance – repentance for which we are blessed by our wrongs being pardoned. How amazing if all who hear this this week act on it.

Practically the first thing we did, gathered here together to worship, together we sought forgiveness for OUR sins, a sense both of that we are in this together to heal together, as also, by our actions we impact on our neighbours' courses of action.

Help me!

So having found a verse to give me a way into these readings that I find difficult to hear I then look to a commentator or two whose thinking I have come to trust, someone who can help clarify what I have just read. I often start with a Catholic priest and theologian called Nicholas King.

Luke

So let's look at the Gospel reading - a story and a parable on one of Luke's main topics – repentance. Both perhaps suggesting it's something to get a move on with doing.

Jesus comments on two incidents that he is told about – some Galileans butchered by Pilate, and 18 people killed in what we might presume is an accident. Jesus makes sure people understand that these people were not worse than anyone else – **his point is that everyone needs to repent.**

Then he tells a parable about an unfruiting fig tree. The owner of the garden wants to get rid of it but the gardener asks for a year's grace for it – a year when they're going to lavish their attention on it. We're talking about the grace of second chances.

A journey of repentance

Nicholas King's question here is – are you on a journey of repentance? – the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem
PTO

Being another theme of Luke's - and I want to pick up on this as it's a topic we have heard at various services from Chris and Pippa in the last few weeks imagining God at one end of this aisle and ourselves at the other and using this Lent to clear the path of the clutter between us.

Now, Tom and I do clutter and I want to speak up for the hoarders and collectors among us! There's no way we wouldn't have been giving that fig tree another chance! We use our 'stuff' to provide materials and inspiration to be creative with and to fix things with; and to remember people and occasions by. We have multiple interests and we have stuff for all of them – so ok, it probably does get a bit much, and as we are always moving on to the next project we're not very good at thinning it out. But experience always shows that if you do start clearing out, you will soon be looking for just the very things that you no longer have!

I accept that most of my stuff is only really important to me – to someone else it is rubbish and the only person who can really refine it is me.

With Tom being ill I am having to spend a lot of time looking through and organising his stuff so that I can start to run our finances, hand over some of his work responsibilities and just tidy up his spaces as it is now me not him who has to be able to find things. I have discovered that deep sorting can only be done a layer at a time. And as I work through these areas of his life that were his and not ours, I find I am getting to know good things about him that in almost forty years of marriage I hadn't really appreciated.

How does a person who does clutter relate to God? What lessons can I learn from the way I live my life in how I relate to God – what might you learn from someone who doesn't want to sweep everything out of the aisle to draw near to God, because having nothing in the aisle wouldn't make them a joyous person.

You are probably a busy person, with all sorts of responsibilities and many people who want or need a bit of your time. How do we make sure that God is in it all, that he is not hidden by our stuff but is our co-worker, adviser, leader helping us to make our resource bank a rich inspiration for faithful living?

And so ...

A good place to start I find is to give thanks for the things which turn out right, which give joy. Then one becomes willing to engage God in the puzzles, the worries – it's about building a relationship. Repentance – heart opening repentance – regular, repeated repentance – being prepared to accept the grace of forgiveness – requires the sort of relationship where there is trust, faith in the goodness of the partner. You need to let God into all the layers, God's not like a spouse who has their own life and doesn't have to share every detail of yours, God will gladly be in all the details.

Draw near with faith my friends, let's be transparent in our dealings with God – God knows all and nothing can be hidden from God – our honesty with ourselves before God's grace, our openness to hear what God is saying to us – will allow us to bear fruit in full abundance – why would you want anything less? Whether your character is enriched by stuff or by clear space, let the gardener care for you and flourish in their care.

Amen.