

WHY SHOULD YOUR CHURCH COMMIT TO A LIVING LENT?

Sunday 24th March
Third Sunday in Lent.

Isaiah 55: 1-9
Psalm 63: 1- 8
1 Corinthians 10: 1-13
Luke 13: 1 -9

Lectionary themes:

All the lectionary readings for this Sunday use explicitly ecological imagery to talk about people's spirituality, which makes them easy to apply for this week's Living Lent preacher. Here the question is raised: what does our ecological state reveal to us about our spirituality? Do we recognise what the dry land, the free availability of water, the sea and the clouds, the risk of snakes and the fig tree which refuses to bear fruit speak to us about our relationship with God? Similarly, as we look at climate change, does the environmental damage we are inflicting suggest something about our wider broken relationship with God?

The obvious pick for eco-links: Psalm 63

The psalmist is praying to God from the desert place, focussing on his experience of thirst, not only as an environmental reality, but as a metaphor for how he experiences God.

"I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water."

How do our environmental conditions shape our understanding of God? We have clean drinking water on tap, but this is not true for many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. What can we learn from their experience of being in parched lands and how they understand God?

The gospel in light of Living lent: Luke 13: 1 -9

Here the gospel starts with a theological reflection on two tragedies in the news: people have been killed in a temple and people have perished as a tower fell. The Roman rule often used violent force, and an attack like this in a sacred area would see emotions heightened. Jesus doesn't answer the question with a comment about politics, but about God's response to evil. He challenges the typical response that people who experienced tragedy were being punished for their own sin.

For us today there is a tendency to say that individual people in vulnerable situations are responsible for the pain they experience, and this is true when we talk about climate change too: but here the emphasis is that those who perish because of environmental conditions is not because of an individual's fault or sin, but that sin is a structural issue. Therefore, as Jesus commands, we all need to repent so that we don't all perish. This is a collective experience of sinfulness and salvation. The real threat is not the danger of towers falling down, but how we face God.

This is illustrated by a parable of the fig tree: a man had a fig tree planted but it didn't bear fruit for three years. He suggested to the gardener that it should be cut down, because by three years it should be mature enough to bear fruit and it still wasn't. The gardener argues that they should wait for another year, adding in the nutrients to the soil that the tree is taking out. At that point, they would review whether it needs cutting down or not.

Fig trees, and their production, were often used as symbolism for the nation of Israel, and its spiritual health, such as in Micah 7:1. Another interesting note is that the Greek contains two different ifs in verse 9: if it bears fruit is 'kan', usually translated 'even if' or 'and if', whereas the second if, 'but if not, you can cut it down', is 'ei', which is an if that has a closer meaning to 'since'. The intercession of the gardener becomes "were it to bear fruit, it can stay, when it does not, then you can cut it down". This grammatical nuance suggests that the it is less likely that the tree will bear fruit than continue to not bear fruit. This shows that a quick response is needed, for if/when the time passes nothing else will be able to be done for the nation. The parable is left open ended, leaving the hearers with the question of what will happen next.

How does this parable relate to climate change?

This raises the question of how our spiritual health is shown by our bearing of fruit, an ecological image that won't be lost on a Living Lent preacher. We can feel that we are in a time where inaction and unfruitfulness seem more likely than action and fruitfulness, but here we are pressed with the urgency of a response. The vine-tender is interceding for us to have more time, giving more nutrients to help the struggling tree, and another season in which to get this right, even though the tree is sapping nutrients from the plants around. This is an undeserved patience, which simultaneously protects the surrounding crops by ensuring more nutrients go into the soil. The tree has had plenty of time to mature, but has failed to live up to its purpose.

We might feel that we live in a time where fruitfulness on this issue is unlikely, but the hope of the parable is that it is left open-ended. We do not have long to respond to issues of climate change, but we do still have some time to change, to repent and turn our lives and planet around.



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