

24th March 2019 Repent: Fleeing into God's mercy Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Intro

In the old, old days way before social media, even before TV ads we had sandwich-board men. They would wander up and down the pavement with boards advertising local businesses and so on. And some of them had messages which read 'Repent – the end is nigh' or something similar. Does anybody remember them? They always looked particularly gloomy. Well, I hope my message this morning is going to be a bit more cheerful. In fact I think I might like my sandwich board to read repent on one side and flee into God's mercy on the other because the two really need to go together as they do in our theme. So this morning I want us to look explore this further, looking particularly at repentance, fleeing, and God's mercy, and what they mean in our lives as Jesus followers today.

Repent

Let's start with repent. A good biblical word but what sort of word is it: is it a noun, a naming word, a verb, a doing word, or an adjective or adverb which are describing words?

It is a verb – a doing word. Repent is something we are told to do and repentance is the noun that describes what we are doing when we repent.

It's important that we see that it is a doing word – it is not a feeling word. There are emotions or feelings that go along with repentance – things like remorse, regret, feeling guilty or bad about something we have done or not done; maybe even tears; But the feeling is not repentance because repent is a ... doing word. It is not to that repentance is a pragmatic, unemotional response, or that our feelings are not involved, but we shouldn't just be looking at those feelings and think that feeling bad is what repentance is all about.

So, what are we doing when we repent?

The main OT Hebrew word for repent is shûb (shooove) and it simply means to turn. It is used either literally for changing direction or as a metaphor for a radical change in lifestyle and behaviour. The constant refrain of the prophets is calling Israel to repent *from their idolatry* and return *to their God*.

Jeremiah 35:15 "I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, sending them persistently, saying, '**Turn** now every one of you from his evil way, and amend your deeds, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to you and your fathers.'

In Isaiah 55 the prophet says:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them **turn** to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." (Isa 55:6-7)

Similarly in the NT the Greek word 'metanoia' refers to a change in our way of thinking that leads to a change of behaviour. So in Luke 3 John the Baptist not only

tells the crowd to repent but he tells them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, whether they are soldiers, tax collectors or just ordinary people.

This morning I invite you to think about what the fruit of repentance might look like in your life; both in your inner life with God and in your outer life as you interact in the community.

So, with this understanding of repentance in mind, let's go on to look at our gospel reading: Luke 13:1-9.

Luke 13:1-9

Jesus is making his final journey to Jerusalem. Along the way he is attracting large crowds eager to hear what this travelling preacher and healer has to say. Perhaps they were hoping that he was the promised Messiah. So there is an increasing sense of excitement but also of impending confrontation and crisis the nearer Jesus gets to Jerusalem. Read the signs of the times; he tells the crowd interpret what is going on; change your ways before it is too late.

Then, suddenly, he is interrupted. We can imagine the scene: the crowd pressing up close to hear every word; then a disturbance as some men elbow their way forward bursting with news of what has been happening in Jerusalem. What they have to say is shocking.

Some Galileans had come to worship in the Temple, but had been attacked by Pilate's soldiers; their blood was mixed with that of the animal sacrifices they brought. Can you imagine the crowd's reaction to this news?

If true, this was a sacrilege as terrible to them as the mosque attacks in Christchurch have been for us. How will Jesus react? Will he denounce Roman brutality? Did these men see it as a sign of the times indicating that enough is enough and now is the time to rise up against the Roman occupation? Will Jesus go along with this?

He does not. Instead he asks them a question.

"Do you think that those Galileans suffered such things because they were greater sinners than all other Galileans?"

Do you see what Jesus has done here? He has diffused a potentially inflammatory situation and shifted the focus of the debate from the other, the hated Romans, on to his audience, the people in front of him. What he is doing is challenging their common Jewish belief that those who suffer deserve to do so because of their sinfulness. No way, he says, using an emphatic double negative, no way. And then he turns the spotlight firmly on his listeners. The victims were no worse sinners than any of them, and he warns them that unless they repent, they too will all perish.

To drive the point home he gives them another example. He reminds them of another tragic incident – the collapse of the tower in Siloam. This time it is Judeans rather than Galileans that are affected and it appears to be the result of a natural disaster rather than human evil. Once again the parallels with Christchurch are quite striking. Why Christchurch? Well, certainly not because they are any worse than the rest of us.

And likewise Jesus argues that those who died were no worse than any of the other people living in Jerusalem at the time. And again he warns the crowd that unless they repent they too will “likewise perish.” These were no idle threats. Jesus is warning His hearers that unless they renounce violence and follow Him they are heading for religious and political disaster. Some among them will probably be killed by Roman swords or falling masonry in the future fall of Jerusalem in 70AD.

Pretty grim stuff. I imagine the crowd were feeling a bit uncomfortable so they were probably quite pleased when Jesus began to tell them a story, a parable.

Like many stories it has a familiar cast of characters that the crowd would have recognised. They would have immediately picked up the OT imagery - in Isaiah 5:1-7 Israel is the vineyard and Yahweh her owner and Palestinian vineyards often contained fruit trees. Flourishing vines and fig trees were a common symbol of peace and prosperity (1 Kgs 4:25; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10.), but unfruitfulness was a sign of judgement. (Jer 8:13; Hos 9:10; Amos 4:9; Joel 1:7, 12)

So the crowd would pick up these OT allusions and understand that Jesus was talking about them as a nation, and because imagery of good and bad figs could also be used for individuals so the parable could also apply to them personally.

In the parable the owner came looking for fruit on his fig tree but he doesn't find any. It's clear from his conversation with the vinedresser that this was not an isolated occurrence but had been going on for the past three years. Look here (ἰδοὺ) the owner says I've been coming here year after year looking for fruit and there's nothing!" He has been getting increasingly frustrated and now he has had enough. "It's a waste of space, cut it down!" he says.

What hung in the balance was more than the fate of a fig tree. The destruction of the fig tree is symbolic of God's judgement upon Israel and demonstrates the urgent need for repentance. Maybe some of the crowd remembered the words of John the Baptist: "The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." (Lk 3:9). It's not looking good.

But unlike other versions of this story that were going around at the time Jesus' story has an unexpected twist. In the 'original' version in Isaiah 5:1-9 there is no plea for mercy, instead the owner himself executes judgement and the vineyard is destroyed, but in Jesus' parable not only is the tree given a year's grace, it is also given special treatment. The vinedresser offers to dig around it, maybe to root prune it or to aerate the soil, and to give it a good dressing of manure. The focus of the story has shifted from judgement to mercy. The tree has another chance.

What I find really interesting is that the conclusion of the parable is open-ended with the outcome dependent on the response of the tree to the mercy shown it. Luke gives us two alternatives. First, the tree may bear fruit in the following year. In this case "well and good." Otherwise, if not, then the owner may remove the tree. How will the nation, and the individuals in the crowd respond to these calls for repentance?

Unfortunately we know from Acts and from Paul's letters that although many Jews responded to God's grace the nation as a whole did not.

As we listen to this story this morning we also are given an opportunity to respond to the ways in which God is working in our lives.

Fleeing from and fleeing to

As we said at the beginning repentance is about action, either turning away or fleeing from or turning or fleeing to, and often both are involved.

It's a theme or pattern that we find over and over again in Scripture as God acts in mercy seeking to draw his people back to himself. So Abraham is called out of Ur of the Chaldees with its worship of false gods to a land where God can reveal himself and make of Abraham the one through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. Then Moses is called to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and into the blessings of the Promised Land. Later when the nation's disobedience finds them in Exile in Babylon God makes a way for them to return, although the Jews of Jesus day felt that this was incomplete given that they were still under foreign occupation. And Jesus in our NT reading is calling the Jews of his day to turn back to God and escape the destruction that would otherwise come upon them.

But then the pattern takes an amazing and unexpected turn. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, opens the way for us, and for all people to escape from the what the Bible calls the kingdom of darkness ruled by the prince of this world and to enter into a covenant relationship with God and become citizens of his kingdom. We are to come out of Babylon, as John says in Revelation 18, for Babylon, as you might remember is destined for destruction. In the final scene of this story, of course, we have the picture of God's people entering into the new Jerusalem in the renewed heavens and earth.

But fleeing from this world does not mean cutting ourselves off and ignoring it. We are citizens of God's kingdom now, not just in the future and we are called into a new way of living now, to be salt and light in the communities in which God has placed us.

For me, one of the striking things to come out of the events of 15th March has been the response of Christchurch, and indeed the whole country to this atrocity. We have chosen to turn away from hatred and division and to embrace inclusion and aroha. Although the majority of people caught up in these events are by no means Christians they have been expressing Christian values – many of them could be taken straight from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. We have a responsibility to maintain this foundation as we consider what kind of society we want to build here in Aotearoa/NZ.

In the bigger picture the call to repentance is a call to stop living our lives by the world's standards, measuring ourselves against what the world calls success. We are to turn from being complicit in all that enables ourselves and others to maintain a self-focused and unsustainable lifestyle at the expense of not only the last the least and the lost but also the planet itself.

Personal response: the challenge to us

But the challenge to us today is also a personal one just as it was for each member of the crowd that Jesus was talking to. The season of Lent is a good time to take stock. Are there things in our lives that we need to flee from or turn away from because they are preventing us from moving into the fullness of life, the abundant life that God wants us to enjoy now as well as in the future.

The other day John and I had the privilege of praying with a guy in great distress because he felt enslaved by alcohol, drugs, pornography and prostitution. We may not have those particular millstones around our necks but we may have bad memories, hurts from the past, embedded attitudes or habits, things that stop us moving on into that fullness of life that God desires for us. Hebrews 12:2 tells us: "What we must do is this: we must put aside each heavy weight, and the sin which gets in the way so easily. We must run the race that is in front of us, and we must run it patiently."

Lent is a good opportunity to take some time out for reflection and to ask God to reveal to us anything that we need to be released from or turn away from. Remember, God never brings these things to the surface to make us feel bad but so that we can recognise them for what they are and be free of them. As we sang: "I'm no longer a slave to sin, I am a child of God."

God's mercy: Isaiah 55:1-9

So far we have focussed on repentance and we haven't said much about God's mercy – partly because it is such a big topic – there is just too much to say. But God's mercy and grace underlies all we have been saying this morning. It is only because of God's mercy and grace to us that repentance is possible at all. In Isaiah 55 the prophet urges the people to turn back to God and reminds them of what blessings lie in store if they do so. He tells them to seek the Lord; to forsake wickedness and evil; to turn to God who will pardon freely. This is mercy – not giving us what we deserve. Remember the saying: grace is when God gives us what we do not deserve; mercy is when God chooses not to give us what we do deserve.

Last week in our house group we were looking at the story of the lost son. When he returns, his father runs to meet his son, lavishes gifts on him, and celebrates; – he treats him in a way he doesn't deserve. Several of us had some sympathy with the elder son – his treatment is not fair to his eyes and nor maybe to our own. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. God is rich in mercy.

So God offers free water to people who are thirsty – I bet some of our firefighters know what that feels like. It's not just water that's on offer but wine and milk. Canaan is a land flowing with milk and honey. Jesus calls himself the good shepherd who has come so that we may have life – life that is full to overflowing. I wonder what that would look like for you?

I want to finish with a verse from 1 Peter. 1 Peter 1:3 – "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."

Let's take time this Lent to examine ourselves and repent, but also to think more deeply on God's mercy and be thankful for all the blessings we have in Christ. Amen