

## As Punishment

7 3 10

Almighty and everlasting God,  
you hate nothing that you have made  
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:  
create and make in us new and contrite hearts  
that we, worthily lamenting our sins  
and acknowledging our wickedness,  
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,  
perfect remission and forgiveness.

My text may be found in Isaiah chapter 55 and verse 6:

‘Seek the Lord while he may be found’.

If January was bad, February was worse. We witnessed gales and flooding on the west coast of France; there was torrential rain and flash floods on Madeira; we heard of the Chilean earthquake, a massive 8.9 on the Richter Scale. For those whose loved ones were killed, for those whose homes were devastated, it must have seemed like the End Times. When we have serious natural disasters or when there's an epidemic like swine flu or when people are killed deliberately or accidentally, then it is natural to ask the question why. We are, after all, reasonable, rational people and we want to make sense of the world in which we live. And one way of doing so is to say it's God judgement on a wicked people.

I understand where such a thought comes from. It is wholly in keeping with a cause and effect universe. From an early age, we learn that there are consequences to what we do. In the French film, 'Le Chorus' set in the year of my birth, one experienced teacher encapsulates the School's code of discipline in saying 'action - réaction' or as my mum would have said, 'If you put your hand in the fire, you'll burn yourself.'

That is why religious people might think and say that when something bad happens it is because someone has been bad and it is God's way of punishing them for their sinfulness. I don't think so. I believe in a God who loves us enough to die for us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. I believe in a God who knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows our short-comings but he has given us this life to live with all the many and varied opportunities to grow and to learn and to come back eventually to him. And hence my text this morning from Isaiah 55: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found'.

A God who punishes wrong-doing is not a new idea: a God of love is. Jesus in today's gospel (Luke 13 v 1 - 9) is confronted by the news that some Galilean pilgrims to Jerusalem have been caught up in violence in the capital and Pilate's Roman soldiers have been implicated, literally they have blood on their hands. This is a scandal and it would have been easy for Jesus, himself a Galilean Rabbi, to condemn the act and to incite hatred against the Roman occupation which sanctioned the violence. Instead, Jesus uses the incident to make a challenging theological point. He asks: 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' His question addresses

the assumption that there is a link between our sinfulness and God's punishment. And, of course, you can see the same idea expressed in reverse: that God will bless the righteous and make them prosper materially – on that basis, Bankers are the good guys. Actually, the rewards of the good life are largely spiritual and are to be found, ultimately, in the life of the world to come. To make the point clearly, Jesus then says unequivocally, 'No I tell you' but it doesn't mean that we should be careless of our opportunities to seek out and discover God: for Jesus goes on to add 'unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

Just in case the crowd has not understood, Jesus makes the point a second time using a parallel case, this time the fall of the tower of Siloam. He says, 'Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

There is a consequence to our actions and we need to take responsibility for what we do. There is always a choice. It is possible to choose not to repent, not to regret being unkind; not to be sorry for the hurt we cause. It is possible to go our own sweet way and to ignore God and ultimately to find ourselves in outer darkness. But whether it is God who casts us out or whether we shut ourselves out is a matter of debate. But of this I am sure: we only have a limited time, however long that time may be, so Isaiah's advice is excellent: 'Seek the Lord while he may be found'.

I appreciate that none of us can fail to be appalled at the scale and cost of natural disasters and it is right for us to ask the question why. Fact is, we are mortal and we only live for a short time compared to the universe in which we live. But we are awake and we are aware and we do have the opportunity to seek God out. There are clearly consequences of our actions but I don't believe it is God beating us up if we have been naughty but by our own choices, we might well be beating up on ourselves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

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H: Sermon 21: Punishment

