

Lent 3: What about those Ukrainians? And what about us?

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High Street Uniting Church Frankston

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Read: **Luke 13: 1-9**

Loving God,

what about those Galileans, whose blood was spilt by Pilate?

What about those Ukrainians, whose blood is spilt by Putin?

The civilians, the bystanders?

And the young Russian soldiers?

Turn away the aggressors, Lord; make them long for home;

and hear the prayers of all who long for peace.

Amen.

Two nights ago I saw footage of a of a woman in Mariupol, a pensioner, speaking to a camera in front of shattered buildings, saying “We are left without anything. We are living in basements. It’s a horror. What for? Tell me what for? What are we guilty of? In whose eyes are we guilty?”¹

In the gospel reading, when some people draw Jesus’ attention to the deaths of some Galileans, presumably in the temple in Jerusalem where Jesus and those with him are heading, Jesus’ response seems at first to be absurd.

He says, “Do you think that they were any worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Was anyone thinking about their sin, their guilt? That’s an absurd idea. When it’s just theoretical, when we’re just reading it as an odd story about ‘abstract’ people in Luke chapter 13, it’s obviously absurd to think in terms of them being better or worse sinners, or even to think about guilt.

But in the depths of the moment, and in the depths of despair, this is where we go, ourselves. What have I done to deserve this? What did we do to deserve this?

We do that for very good reason. Because God has given us a heart for justice, and we long for the world to be just, and yet our experiences and our privileges and our sufferings are, to a very large degree, because of circumstances that are beyond us and because of structures that are not always just.

The thread of evil that has emerged in the heart of Putin threads through all of society, in ways that we sometimes tolerate, sometimes fight against, and sometimes are complicit in ourselves.

¹ SBS News, 18/3/2022

When people draw Jesus' attention to the Galileans who have died at the hand of Pilate, Jesus speaks clearly against a misconception that continually raises its head, about whether those who suffer somehow deserve it. Jesus reminds us that we are all equal.

Jesus doesn't even attempt to provide an easy explanation of suffering – even if it could be 'explained', it's not clear that explaining would really help.

Bear in mind that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, that he would identify as a Galilean, and we know what will happen to him there. And not because he deserves it. Rather than explain suffering, Jesus enters into it himself, as part of his identification with all of humanity.

Jesus turns any question of guilt back on those who ask it, inviting us to consider our own lives, our own threads of sin, our own relationship with God – not because we might be 'better' or 'worse', but because we equally live and die before God. And we equally are called to our responsibilities for promoting justice and peace in our place, in our community, and in these lands now called Australia.

He also tells a story about a fig tree, to give some illustration of God's forbearance in human sin and strife.

In the first instance the fig tree analogy is personal, because he turns the question back on the individuals who ask it. We are the fig trees, and Jesus the gardener asks God to continue to have mercy on us as he continues to nurture the soil, nurture us. That seems like an immediate application of the parable. It's about us and our growth.

But it also goes wider. A fig tree is often used as a symbol for Israel, or, we could substitute, the church.

Today is the day of our Annual General Meeting. We've had a couple of years of lockdown, so the owner of this fig tree might well look at us and say: what fruit has this church borne over the last two years? Has it borne the fruit of justice and care, good news for the poor hope for the oppressed, care for creation, and witness to Jesus? And maybe Jesus asks Creator God to give us one more year, as he applies the manure to the soil – as we get worked into the soil (because I think we're in this analogy). Our own contributions have a part to play in the health of the church.

But let's go further. Imagine that the fig tree is the world. And sometimes it looks like the world is not bearing good fruit. And surely Creator God mourns.

In this picture, we are called to be the gardeners. The gardeners who plead to Creator God: don't give up on the world yet. Just as Jesus does not give up on us, but loves us to the end, so may we learn from him to not give up on the world. May we plead with Creator God that we might continue to tend the soil and work for good, for justice, for peace; that God would not give up on us.

For us to tend the soil means dealing with the layers of injustice that we quietly exploit. It means praying for and supporting those who suffer. It means making decisions that give hope for generations to come. It means praying against the spiritual evils that infect the powers and the powerful – because there is a spiritual battle here - and praying for the humanity of those, like so many Russian soldiers who are led to immoral fights, that they may turn away.

On our AGM day, on the third Sunday of Lent, this call is for us to attend to our personal guilt and seek God's grace; to mourn with the world and seek God's grace; and to ensure that the church is responsive in the fruit that we bear.

Which brings me to this plant here...

This is 'Wesley', which used to be at the front of the Wesley church and has survived here at the front of the church since Wesley and St Andrews came together as High Street Uniting, surviving here even through pandemics and lockdowns.

The fig tree analogy reminds me of Wesley, and of this whole congregation. Jesus talks about giving the tree one more year... Nurturing it that it may bear fruit that will last. As a way of symbolising that, I want to invite you to pray silently for the tree that is this congregation, and our witness in justice and hope for the sake of the world.

As we take a few minutes of silent prayer, if you are in the church, if you would like you could come forward and place some mulch at the base of this plant as you pray for that witness of justice and hope in which we all have a part; if you are on the phones or zoom, either now or later find a plant and touch its leaves, touch the soil, and pray for God's growth in the plant, in you, in the church's witness and in the world.

Let's have some quiet moments, to pray, and bring some mulch if you wish.