

**24.3.19**  
**Suffering & Endurance**  
**Lent 3**

**Bentworth, Shalden, Lasham & Medstead**

**Isaiah 55.1-9**

**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**

**Luke 13:1-9**

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

<sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

<sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

<sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.'

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any.

<sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven't found any.

Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

<sup>8</sup> "Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it.

<sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

Let us pray

In recent days we have seen the grounding of nearly every Boeing 737 Max passenger aircraft.

This has followed the two recent disasters when this brand new aircraft inexplicably became impossible to fly.

The crash in Ethiopia was especially poignant.

Everyone wants to know why it happened.

For the engineers it is a technical question. They are studying the black boxes in Paris. Looking for answers.

For others, it is a theological question: Why has this happened to so many good people:

Amongst the 157 who lost their lives, there were children,  
4 Catholic Aid Workers,  
22 experts on the environment attending a conference with the UN,  
Save the Children's child protection in emergencies adviser,  
an aid worker from Lancashire,  
a Nigerian ambassador,  
a global deputy chief engineer for the UN World Food Programme,  
three Austrian doctors in their early 30s.

And so the list goes on.

All good people – and their families and those who they have given their lives to ask the question: “Why?”

It is, of course, the oldest question that humanity asks in the face of suffering and loss.

Sometimes the question is: Why has God done this to me? Or sometimes: “Why has God allowed this to happen?”

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is being asked this very question by those who saw suffering as a direct result of sin in some way.

Two days after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a man called Frank Silecchia became something of a legend.

He was a strong burly construction worker who along with the firefighters ventured into the catastrophic ruins of the World Trade Center.

Frank was worn out and torn apart by so much destruction. “*I don't know what hell is like*”, he said, “*but I imagine it as a place like this.*”

Looking for a place to get his breath, Frank had groped his way into a gigantic atrium that was once Building 6 of the World Trade Center,

and here, by the light of his flashlight, in absolute silence, he discovered a 20 foot high steel cross that had been part of the structure of the tower and had somehow come to rest, standing upright with a swathe of metal draped along the cross beam, like a discarded robe.

*"Behind it," he recounted, "were two other smaller crosses made of steel. I thought of Calvary and falling to my knees I wept; I wept for a long time."*

And as he did, there in the rubble Frank felt a strange sense of peace and stillness in that little grotto. He could almost hear God saying:

*"The terrible thing done at this site was meant for evil but I will turn it to good. Have faith. I am here."*

On the walls of that atrium, Frank wrote "*God's House*" in spray paint, and the spot became a pilgrimage site for the tired workers and firefighters at Ground Zero.

Fr. Brian Jordan, a Roman Catholic Franciscan priest, declared it to be a "*symbol of hope... a symbol of faith... a symbol of healing*".

He said: *"It was as if the cross took in the grief and loss. I never felt Jesus more."*

Somehow, the discovery of this cross in the midst of human tragedy became a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of the presence of God and a means of grace.

They all felt that somehow, in the midst of it all, God was saying: "Have faith, I am here".

It gave them something to hold on to as they faced the relentless questions as to *why* such a thing could happen.

The cross stands as a memorial to this day.

In our St Luke's Gospel reading today we hear of another tower that had collapsed. We hear how 18 people died.

Clearly many people had surmised as to why it had happened. There were a number of conspiracy theories – the most prevalent being that the tower had killed them because they were sinners.

We look back at such theology with considerable disdain and ridicule.

And yet, at the time of the 9/11 attacks Jerry Falwell, the outspoken American pastor and former Moral Majority leader appeared on Television the day after the terrorist attack had occurred.

He decided not to criticize Islamic Fundamentalism but to major on faults that he saw at home in America.

He was arguing that the root problem was the so-called "*liberal*" agenda - for example, the exclusion of God from public education and the scandal of abortion.

For him the collapse of the towers was because of America's sin.

Many people were angry at his cruel theology.

And the point is, bad theology about suffering, and especially natural disasters, can give the

Christian faith the most bigoted of impressions to a world that is desperate for care.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus was being asked for explanations. *Why did the tower fall and kill 18 people? Was it because they were sinners?*

In reality it was probably because it was badly built and they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and someone should have sued!

Yet, in mentioning the collapse of the tower of Siloam, Jesus taught that death can come upon anyone, regardless of how sinful they are.

He went on to teach that the need for *all* people to repent is the true lesson from such tragedies.

Go to Chile, for example, the wealthiest nation in Latin America, architects have been able to build thousands of earthquake-resistant homes for the poor.

Meanwhile in the whole of Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, there were as few as three earth-quake resistant buildings.

Perhaps many of those who died in Haiti died because of a lack of protection by those of us with the means to care for them.

Maybe, if anyone is a sinner here it has been those who may have had the means to change this situation but failed to do so.

Why the innocent suffer and the strong go unpunished is the stuff of every Tabloid newspaper. It is the constant theme of the theology of the street.

It was the question on the lips of the people in the time of Jesus:

But the idea that God actually causes human suffering to teach us a lesson was directly contradicted by Jesus.

*Verse 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?  
I tell you, no!*

For me, having lived amongst many hundreds of young people who live with the randomness of disability I still don't pretend to know the answers. Their deformed and paralysed bodies attacked everyone's sense of well-being and invincibility, including mine.

Many would try to find reasons for the accidents they had had, the diseases they had inherited or the lack of oxygen at birth that had destroyed their mobility.

Once, I remember meeting the dad of a teenager who was slowly wasting away with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. Dad was a successful businessman, and he sat on the edge of his chair as he said to me:

*"I believe that the reason why my son has muscular dystrophy is because when I was a child I stole some pennies from my grandfather. I am sure my stealing has something to do with it now."*

He was an intelligent man – he just couldn't make sense of his son's suffering. In a way, he was looking to me for absolution. He was in spiritual pain.

My task was to listen to his story, to hear his questions about meaning in a non-judgemental manner and to try to provide significant presence for him, not to abandon him.

But I did not have the answers for him as to why his son was dying.

What I do know, as with John Austin Baker, is that *'the hands that hold us in existence are pierced with unimaginable nails'*.

Finding the cross in the midst of the destruction somehow seems to give us hope.

Along with the disciples we see in the resurrected Christ, not only the wounds of his impaired side, hands and feet, but also the 'embodied *imago Dei*', the image of God.

Christianity does not have an able-bodied God as its primal image, rather 'a disabled God promising grace through a broken body'.

I don't know how to explain random and innocent suffering, but throughout my life I have

found the crucifixion of Christ somehow speaking to me. It seems to say: *"I am here with you. I am not distant and far away. I bear your grief and carry your sorrows"*.

But any attempt to make suffering comprehensible by some explanation or theory is always in danger of denying the mystery.

As we know, Christianity is not problem solving but mystery encountering and anyone who tries to find a simple explanation for it has not confronted the questions.

There are, it seems to me, no easy answers, only good responses.

How we respond to suffering is the measure of our humanity.

Civilization is judged by the way it responds to those who are most marginalized. Indeed the Church is judged by the way in which we respond for the most vulnerable.

But again, finding the cross in the midst of the destruction gives us hope and helps us to endure.

I passionately believe in two things: that God loves us, but that bad things can still happen to innocent people.

Jesus knew that too. It was on his lips as he hung on the cross.

But in our Gospel reading he did not shy away from the importance of repentance.

Not as an insurance against tragedy, or towers falling on us, but as the way to the healing of our relationship with God, from whom forgiveness and the gift of all life comes.

Lent is a time when we reflect on our sufferings, those of our own and the sufferings of the world, as creation groans and stretches, and the very Earth twists and quakes.

The good news is that our church towers appear to be in a good state of repair.

And the other bit of good news is that whatever happens to us, as fragile, vulnerable human beings, we are embraced by the overwhelming love of God; a *“love that will not let me go”*.

In the midst of the destruction there stands a wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died that we might forever know how much we are loved and that through him we are eternally safe.

And in the end, that’s all we need to know...  
Amen.