Sermon for 3rd in Lent Year C

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

i

Free food and drink is rarely refused. Offering lavish hospitality cements a new relationship such as a wedding feast or a business lunch, or celebrates a special occasion. A free feast is a very happy occasion in any culture and it is a fitting symbol for God’s generous love and provision for his people.

Only the wealthy can offer such a feast, but God does not have to be stinting in his provisions and does not have to limit his guest list.

Isaiah offers this optimistic vision of the immediate future to mark the end of the Exile in Babylon. Now the punishment years are behind them, now the lean years of homelessness and hunger are over, the future beckons full of hope.

The people of God will now have all the food they could wish, all the very best food and wine – and without limit and at no cost. Their captivity in Babylon will be transformed into the fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham that they should be a blessing to all the nations of the earth when the foreign nations will come rushing to Jerusalem in grateful friendship to join the wonderful feast.

Sadly, Isaiah’s dreams for the restoration of Jerusalem never came to fruition. Yes, the city and the temple were rebuilt and briefly in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah things may have looked as if they were going Isaiah’s way, but in truth they had simply exchanged the grim Exile under the Babylonians for a longer chain still held by the Persians.

Life under the Greeks proved no better when they took over from the Persians. Even a Jewish dynasty that flourished for a century after the Maccabean revolt proved a fractious and fratricidal affair.

Life under Roman rule and under Rome’s favourite son, Herod the Great, was no better despite the apparent resurgence of national pride and autonomy and Herod’s costly refurbishment of the temple.

Yet if Isaiah spoke the Word of the Lord, then his vision had to come true. As Isaiah goes on to say in the verses following the passage we heard today: God’s Word shall accomplish that which it is sent to do, it will not return fruitless.

So why had Isaiah’s dream not come true, if the Word of God has to come true?

Well, reading Isaiah’s vision for the future again, we need to see the conditional nature of that promise: “Turn to the Lord now he is near. Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking.”

If the return home does not also mean a fresh start – the opportunity will be lost and God’s promised future will have to wait. The promise is secure because God has made the promise – but who receives those blessings depends on whose heart is ready to receive them.

God does not think like humankind thinks. “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours,” says the Lord.

This is because we would have given up on the whole enterprise of salvation if we had been in charge. We would have thought it a hopeless cause. But God just keeps on trying.

Eventually the Christians came along and said they had become the recipients of these promises. They would now inherit the banquet of the Lord, they would know the abundant blessings of God, because they received them through Christ who had been the true and faithful Son, whose heart was true and whose life was obedient even to death upon the cross.

ii

It is because God’s ways are higher than our ways that Jesus refutes the common assumption that people who died in two recent disasters died because they deserved it. Some had been caught up in an outburst of violence with Pontius Pilate and others crushed to death when a tower collapsed upon them.

It is humans that would become so annoyed with people that we would destroy them to get them out of the way. If we were God we would quickly lose patience with those who resisted and bring destruction falling upon their heads, but God isn’t like that – we are. Whenever people say God has sent a famine or tsunami or AIDS or Ebola or a plane crash on certain people in order to punish, people are assuming that God thinks as they think. These victims no more deserved their fate than anyone else.

Yet Jesus is able to use the report of those two disasters to make another point – that the people in general were heading straight for such disasters themselves unless they repented from their sins. What did Jesus mean?

Jesus was not contradicting himself and saying that indeed, God is preparing such awful deaths for people who commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet their neighbour’s donkey.

The word “repent” does not just mean show private contrition for the things you have done wrong – it also bears the meaning of “turning around,” of “changing direction.”

Jesus was warning the whole nation to turn away from its militaristic and nationalistic visions of liberation and of the Messiah because that path would lead them to confrontation with Rome and many more would die from sword or falling masonry in the war that would ensue.

God’s ways are to keep on trying to get his message through. So in Jesus’s parable of the fig tree without any figs, God is the gardener who says, no, just one more season, let me dig around the roots for one more year.

This, God is now doing in the ministry of Jesus. This is their last chance. There is a time for everything and opportunities do have to come to an end and even God cannot wait forever. If people will not respond, God will find others who will.

Will they stick to their misguided militaristic visions of a Messiah, or will they turn away from that pending horror and follow the Prince of Peace?

iii

Paul has a difficult time of it with Corinth. After Paul had moved on the church split into rival factions, some for Peter, some for Apollos and some for Paul, there was a case of incest, there are instances of Christians taking each other to a pagan court, there is disorder at the Lord’s Supper and some that appear to question the truth of Christian resurrection because they are still attuned to the Greek, Platonic way of thinking about the human body.

Paul reminds them that the blessings the Christians are claiming for themselves can still be lost if their hearts are not right with God.

Paul reminds them of the Children of Israel of Moses’ day who were given the most wonderful blessings by God as they escaped from Egypt and were sustained by manna and water in the desert, but through their lack of trust in the faithfulness of God to keep his promises, most of that generation had died in the wilderness and never set foot in the Promised Land.

Corinth was famous for its sexual orgies and over-eating and drunkenness. There were some converts, like there are in mind in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* that believe that the forgiveness of Christ means they are now free to act how they wish.

Some believe that the end of the Law of Moses means there are no rules at all for how Christians live. They wanted both the figurative feast of the Lord spoken of by Isaiah and the literal feasting of Corinth.

Paul sees the temptations that Corinth has to offer as a test the Christians have to withstand. It is through their ability to remain true to their calling that the New Life of which they talk can be seen to be a reality.

So they should see their situation in the moral morass of Corinth not as an opportunity to indulge themselves, because all their sins would be forgiven by Christ, but as an opportunity for God to work in them to help them overcome the city’s temptations and so witness to the city of the transforming grace they have received through Christ.

So we see that the common thread running through all our readings today is the temptation to waste a God-given opportunity, the temptation to spurn the offer of a new start and to keep on living just like we have always done, the temptation to conform outwardly to our faith in Christ but to allow it no room whatsoever to change our hearts, the temptation to think God is both as quick to punish others and as over- indulgent of our sins as we are.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**