

## **The Third Sunday in Lent: Lament – Confess – Repent!**

**Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63; Luke 13:1-9**

What can we do in the face of atrocity? Civilians buried in the rubble of Mariupol. Two thousand years earlier, Galileans massacred by Pontius Pilate. The cry goes up from Jerusalem and from Kyiv, and from Aleppo, and Gaza, and from Falluja and Sarajevo, Dresden and London ... How often have citizens lamented over the destruction of their home. Cowering in basements, or fleeing from home, or burying your loved ones, or assaulted by invading soldiers, or looking on the buildings you've always known lying in ruins: can anything, can anyone repair the devastation? can the lamentation ever cease?

Whether in Jerusalem or in Mariupol, you cannot quell the cry of lamentation. For in the face of evil it is necessary *to descend into the depths*. As the people of Jerusalem had done so often before, leaving for their descendants their cries and poems of lament. The psalms we still sing are full of them. 'They have made Jerusalem a heap of stones. The dead bodies of your servants they have given to be food for the birds of the air, and the flesh of your people to the beasts of the field.' And then, as so often, the half-faithful, half-desperate cry to God: 'Rise up! Why sleep, O Lord? Awake, and do not reject us for ever.'

This is honest prayer, prayer from the depths, not polite deference or pious wallpaper. The cry of lamentation doesn't attempt to explain away the atrocity or cover it over with attempts at optimism.

Now this raises a problem if we want to feel at home in the world; if we want to believe that behind the terrors of history there is after all a moral order, a God of providence. Those disasters Jesus talks about – Pilate's massacre, the tower that collapsed and killed 18 people – isn't there *some reason*, weren't the victims killed because *they had sinned*?

That's how the book of Deuteronomy, and many other parts of the OT, try to order events. If you or your nation do right, you will flourish; if you do wrong you will suffer. The books of Kings explain Israel's history on that basis. But, within the same OT, the book of Job performs a pretty powerful hatchet job on that attempt at moral order. Job the thoroughly righteous man suffers abominably. His so-called friends say, 'Well, Job, you must have done something wrong, confess your sin'. But Job insists, battering away at this callous God, until his terrible lamentation is heard and his friends are rebuked.

No, says Jesus, those people in Galilee and under the tower didn't perish because they sinned, that's not how the world works. But then he seems to turn very harsh himself: 'No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did'. If the fig-tree persists in being fruitless, it must be felled.

'*Repent! Repent!*' There is the repeated call from Jesus, and from our patron saint John the Baptist, amplified even more in this season of Lent. What does this mean? Do we too need to repent? If so, how are we to go about it?

Repentance often gets confused with remorse or with penitence, with sorrow for what we've done or who we are. And penitence in turn gets confused with a kind of self-hatred to which religious people can be prone. If we followed literally the injunctions of the old Prayer Book, we would be confessing at least two or three times a day that we are 'not worthy', 'miserable sinners' and that the burden of those sins was 'intolerable'.

No, if we trust God, there's no need for all this hypocrisy. All Jesus tells us to say is 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'; or the prayer of the tax-collector in his story, 'Lord, have mercy on me a sinner'.

Yes, of course there's a place for practical, healing penitence. If I know I have sinned against my neighbour I must say sorry at the earliest opportunity. And it's a good practice to reflect at the end of the day on any sins we have committed and to ask pardon. And if our conscience still troubles us, to confess those sins before a priest or a wise friend and seek absolution.

Fine ... but all this is *looking back*, clearing the ground for something more fruitful. The word 'repent' literally means changing your mind, turning round. Repentance, whether for a person or a society, is restless; it's refusing to be bound by the way things are. 'Seek the Lord; return to the Lord', we heard the prophet proclaim. And 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand' is how both Jesus and John the Baptist begin their address to the world.

The kingdom (or the rule) of God is at hand ... So look up! For there are immense possibilities ahead, possibilities of just and peaceful living, flourishing as fruitful trees in God's kingdom. Or, as we heard the prophet's call to repentance: 'Come, buy wine and milk ... listen to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food ...' Not a very 'lenten' call ... but no harm in that! For yes, the whole point of the fast of Lent is to lead to the feast of *Easter* – even through the sins and atrocities of our world, even through the passion and death of God's Messiah. And that is why those psalms, which are so full of lament (and, incidentally largely lacking in penitence), are equally full of *praise* – praise all the keener if we now sing them in the faith of the risen Christ.

So, yes, *lament*, for lament we must in our stricken world. Yes, *confess*, for we ourselves are sinners. But above all, *repent*: even in the depths of crisis and atrocity, can we look up, look ahead, commit our imagining and our praying and our acting in the world to just and merciful living: fruit that will last, a tree that will not be cut down?

From those depths of God-forsakenness, Christ is risen. So we can join with the repenting saints of all ages as we too stand to praise God in our confession of faith

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*Christopher Burdon*