

**Lent 2: 28 February 2010; CCSY**  
*Gen 15:1-12, 17-18; Phil 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:1-9*

‘So Jesus’, they ask him, ‘why do bad things happen? Where was God when Pilate butchered our fellow Galileans who were going about their prayers? Where was God when the tower of Siloam fell and crushed those poor people in Jerusalem? Were they being punished somehow? Was it just bad luck in a random world?’

These are questions that have echoed down the millennia, evoking rivers of ink in the attempt to justify God in the face of evil, and suffering – an exercise called ‘theodicy’.

Biblical writers and commentators, theologians, ethicists, and philosophers down the centuries have offered a host of theodicies: many of them incomprehensible, some of them distasteful, most pastorally unhelpful.

Have you noticed how often when Jesus is asked a thorny question he tells a story in response? ‘And who is my neighbour?’, asks the lawyer a few chapters earlier in Luke’s gospel. ‘Well’, says Jesus, ‘a man went down to Jericho and fell among robbers...’ And today: ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ ‘Well’, says Jesus, ‘A man had a fig tree...’

We have a lemon tree in the vicarage garden which fits this description exactly: four years, three different locations, potted, unpotted, protected from gawl wasps, bags of citrus fertilizer, and not so much as one lousy lemon. Why should it continue to take up valuable space and waste precious water? And yet we can’t bring ourselves to dig it up; we celebrate every pathetic new green shoot and unseasonal flower.

This parable says something about the patience of God; the refusal of the Creator to give up on creation, or abandon it to its apparent fate. Of course Jesus gets this sense of the divine stubbornness from his own tradition.

In our first reading from Genesis, for example, God cuts a covenant with Abraham whereby the covenant partners, in this case God and Abram, invoke a curse on themselves should they fail to honour their bond; that’s what the liturgical procession between the two halves of the carcasses – complete with candles and plenty of incense – signifies in the ancient Near East. And we note that this all happened in the context of ‘a deep and terrifying darkness’ which had descended on Abram – the same dread-ful dream-like state attributed twice to that archetypal ‘innocent sufferer’, Job.

In this dark epiphany, at the point of Abram’s deepest confusion and fearfulness, God binds himself to his people’s story in the strongest possible terms, to the point of invoking a curse on God’s self. Likewise, in the story Jesus tells, the gardener stands by this feeble fig tree, risking his reputation as a horticulturalist on its capacity to come good.

Albert Einstein once famously quipped: ‘God doesn’t play dice with the universe’. With all due respect to the great physicist, the God whose character is narrated in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jesus’ parables pretty clearly does – not in some sort of reckless or capricious way, but in the sense that Eden’s Gardener takes a risk in creating something that is truly free: free at the level of human will; free at the level of cells that mutate for good and ill; free at the level of the earth’s tectonic plates which shift to create beauty and devastation.

As any parent, or artist knows, creation is a risk. And in the Judeo-Christian tradition the risk of creation it is inseparable from the risk of redemption. We encounter the cost of this dual risk in the curse of humanity's exile from Eden, and the curse of the tree which overshadows that other, olived garden of Gethsemane, where the tired feet of the Creator also walked in the chill of one particular moonlit evening – curses both of which God wears, having so bound himself to the work of his hands.

Indeed throughout history and still, in the wake of natural disaster or acts of religiously motivated violence, God risks God's reputation in the hope that creation will at length choose the life and the flourishing God seeks for it, because in Christ we learn that the way God participates in history looks like this . . . [crucifix above pulpit]

On this tree, not far from where some soldiers played dice for Jesus' clothes, God rolls the dice: God throws in the divine lot with us, stands immovably by the good if unfinished creation, willing it to be its true self – to bear figs, for God's sake, as much as for its own, because the glory of God, as it is said, is the human being fully alive.

So it is that Jesus calls his listeners to repentance – to open themselves to God's cultivation, including pruning, no doubt, and some stuff that doesn't smell too good – because to live otherwise than God's vision for us is to perish utterly: the sort of living death St Paul describes to the Philippians.

Our final hymn today [*Together in Song* 262] invites us to 'marvel at God's nakedness' – nakedness we will reverence on Good Friday – and to sense the play of chance, of godly risk – to contemplate the precariousness of divine activity – in the story of Christ's Passion, and then to 'take our chance with God'.

What might that mean for us, exactly? What risk might we be being asked to take this Lent so as to co-operate with God's patient vision for us? How deep, inscrutably so, the Wisdom of our God, how weak but truly wise: to risk and to free our hearts for the good that we are in that loving gaze.

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