

### GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE

In these difficult sayings of Jesus, we hear both a message about the time of judgment that gives us no more options but also a message about the God of the second chance.

It's a gruesome tale that some people tell Jesus, of Jews from Galilee who had been at the Temple, worshipping God. Whilst they were there, in a mindless act of violence, Pilate had them butchered along with their own animals. They didn't stand a chance. It's not so very different as someone deciding to shoot innocent children, or let off a bomb at a church, in Nigeria as happened last year around Easter time

And the people who talk to Jesus want to check out whether they are right in what they have worked out as the reason for this appalling event.

There was a strong idea around at the time that when disaster struck in a person's life, it was a sign of that person's sin. If something bad happened, it was God's punishment for their wickedness. It's a misconception that hasn't entirely gone away. So, they ask, did that horrible death in the temple show that those Galileans were worse sinners than others? Was that why they were killed?

And what about the great disaster when a tower collapsed, killing 18 people. Did it prove God's judgment for their sins?

The question of why these things happen still bothers us today. Innocent children, innocent worshippers, innocent bystanders - it makes no difference. Yet Jesus clearly says that their manner of death is not a statement about God's anger over sin. It may prove how evil people can be and how we need a hope beyond this life, if collapsing buildings can bring death so easily.

What Jesus wants to bring home to people is that there is no graded scale of sin. It's not enough to say, "I'm better than the next man and I can prove it because I haven't had as many disasters in my life." The connection isn't so straightforward,

and we don't get off the hook so lightly. What Jesus says is that everyone, without exception, is in the same danger of having their lives cut off without any more options, just as those people in the two news headline stories did.

Jesus urges all of us to a once and for all turning back to God for his forgiveness. A single, decisive moment of repentance. Then we will be ready for death, however that happens. As we heard Isaiah say: *'Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked man forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and God will have mercy on him, to our God who will freely pardon.'* (Isa 55:6-7)

Yet the message of Jesus moves on. It becomes a parable about God's grace and patience. God doesn't treat anyone according to their just deserts. If he did, then the fact that we are all guilty according to his standards would leave no room for manoeuvre. Instead, he is the God of the second chance. Again, Isaiah says: *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways (55:8)* God's word, says Isaiah can accomplish things you never imagined. New creation is possible.

*In the garden of the house where I grew up, we had a small flowering cherry tree. It didn't do much, but occasionally we got the odd bud and bit of leaf. I remember my mum grumbling about it year after year and saying that eventually when she got round to it, she was going to dig it out, because apart from anything else, the other plants below weren't getting enough light. It had had its last chance and the day of judgment was coming, when we had a new garage built alongside the garden. Some careful workman with delicate footwear, wielding a few roofing panels, swung towards it and severed a big branch. Everyone thought that was the final stroke for the poor tree. Not so! Still not having got round to moving it, my mum ended up completely baffled that after threats and semi-destruction, the following spring, our poor tree began to flourish and produce blossom as never before! Execution day, as you would guess, was postponed! A second chance, and not what it seemed to deserve at all!*

That is what we are like, and that is what God is like, says Jesus.

Israel was God's nation of chosen people, who should have been showing in their lives the characteristics of lives established with God and growing up with him. There should have been fruit for all to see. Yet it wasn't so. Like our cherry tree,

everything seemed to be in their favour, but there were no results. There was no evidence in the lives of the people of Israel that they were living God's way.

It's no different today. Many say they believe in God, but few actually produce the kind of characteristics you would expect. When a fruit tree doesn't fruit, to dig up the plant and let others have the benefit of the good soil would be quite reasonable. For God to give no more options to his people when they fail him would be just as reasonable.

We wonder, too, why God doesn't punish evil right here and now, when it happens instead of letting people apparently get away with it, scot free. The apostle Peter put it this way *"the Lord is not slow to do what he has promised, as some think. Instead, he is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins."* (2 Pet. 3:9)

Although there will be, for everyone, a moment of finality, God is also like the gardener who gives the tree a second chance. He is the one who cares for and nurtures and gives every bit of attention to it, to give it opportunity to grow. And it works. It isn't what the plant deserves, or what the people who turn their backs on his care deserve, but he is the God of the second chance.

It's a constant theme – Jesus talks about prodigal sons being welcomed home when dutiful sons have attempted to do the right thing; wandering sheep being searched for when 99 good sheep stay where they are put....and it changes people. Zaccheus gave away more money than he had taken; a prostitute was honoured for pouring perfume on Jesus' feet; an unclean leper was healed; a woman who was desperate for healing was given a new status.

People get another go at life, in spite of what everyone else thinks they deserve. It's an idea we like but it's also difficult because we don't seem to see people getting what we think they deserve or working for something good.

Whilst there will come a time when there are no more options, at the moment, every day is a second chance. Every day is a chance to say sorry for the mess we make of things, and have another try. Every day is a chance to change. Every day is a chance to prove our love for God or someone else. We don't really deserve any of it, but we get a second chance.

When I worked in a home for disabled children in Jerusalem, a girl with no legs drew me a picture of a bird in a cage, with a striped, multicoloured jumper on. She added a quote from a book. It said, *"every day is a new beginning - or at least the possibility of one."* She sensed the potential and the gift of every new start she had, even without the usual abilities that most of us have.

So we, with every fibre of our being, should be sure that we have made that decisive turn towards God that keeps us safe for heaven, but that we also take every day thankfully, as a second chance to fruit and flower and live a little closer to God and his standards. The Holy Spirit is with us each day with the sole aim of helping us to produce the wonderful fruit of God's nature within us. We, too, should perhaps be moved to think of the people who need us to give them a second chance when they've messed things up the first time.

When we look at Jesus, we see a God who loves so much that he wants nobody to lose out. We have a God of the second chance. Let's be sure that each and every day, we take it and we give it.