

**Sunday 23 March 2025**  
**The Third Sunday of Lent**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 55.1-9**

**NT: I Corinthians 10.1-13**

**Gp: Luke 13.1-9**

On the face of it, today's readings from Isaiah and Corinthians could hardly provide a greater contrast. The passage from Isaiah is lyrical, joyful, full of assurance, whereas Paul's tone in I Corinthians 10 is particularly gloomy and hectoring.

For all kinds of reasons, including the style of writing and the varied references to the historical situation, scholars are now generally agreed that the book of Isaiah is actually made up of the writings of three authors, from different periods. They have all kinds of common themes, so that it makes good sense to bring them together under the heading of Isaiah, which is the name of the first author, at least. Isaiah 55 is the last chapter of the second section of the book, summing up many of the themes and concerns of chapters 40 to 55.

At the heart of this chapter is the picture of God's extravagant invitation to the banquet. There is no cost, all are welcome. Running parallel with that is the theme of forgiveness. There are still those who are trying to buy food and wine, although they can see and smell the free riches that are spread out on God's banqueting table. It is almost as if they are afraid to believe in the generosity of God. Surely there must be some catch, they ask?

But there are no hidden clauses, Isaiah assures us. The invitation is for all God's people, and through them, for all the world. All who ask for God's mercy will receive it. The only step is to accept God as he is, and trust in his quixotic abundance. And from this hymn to the love of God, we have to turn to what Paul has to say. The heart of this difficult passage is I Corinthians 10.12: *"If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall"*.

The Corinthians obviously believe that they are indeed standing, that they know most of the answers, and that they have entered into God's promises. Paul holds up for them the salutary picture of others who believed themselves so secure that they no longer bothered to attend to the character of God. Perhaps there is not, after all, such a great contrast between Isaiah and Paul. Isaiah reminds us that God's ways are not our ways, and Paul is just recasting that reminder in sterner language. Turning to God is a lifetime's discipline, learning his nature and his will, patiently and humbly, over and over again. The great temptation is to take short cuts that lead to more immediate gratification, but as Isaiah asks: *"Why..... spend your money for that which is not bread?"* (Isaiah 55.2).

The passage from Luke's Gospel holds Isaiah and Paul together in productive tension. This strange little passage is about both repentance and mercy. Isaiah may seem to stress mercy and Paul repentance, but Isaiah knows that we have to *"return to the LORD"* (v. 7) to receive his mercy, and Paul knows that *"God is faithful"* (I Corinthians 10.13) in his desire to hold us in our struggles.

Only Luke gives us this story, which the lectionary separates from its context in verses 54 to 56 in the previous chapter (Luke's original, of course, had no chapters!). Jesus has been encouraging people to read the signs of the times, just as they read the weather. So they give him two signs of the times to interpret. One sign tells of a police action by Pilate, whose troops have violently quelled a demonstration of people on their way to sacrifice at the Temple. The other seems to be a natural disaster – the collapse of a tower killing 18 people. Jesus refuses to accept these as punishments for individual sin – an interpretation that would leave others who had not experienced these disasters feeling smugly self-satisfied – but insists that everyone needs to repent. The term 'repent' implies not so much 'regret' as 'change direction'. He drives the point home with a parable: I suspect that this was a funny story, in Jesus' original telling of it. It may have involved a bit of horseplay with manure, perhaps. Certainly, when you put verses 1-5 together with verses 6-9, you can't help feeling that someone is teasing.

Are we in a great rush, or can we take our time? But if what is on offer is the generous mercy of God - call it manure, or call it bread and wine, as Isaiah does - why wait? What possible reason can there be to procrastinate about such an offer? The patient gardener who leaves the fig tree standing will lose patience in the end; the God who has been patient with the people won't be patient for ever. God's patience continues even in Acts, where the gospel is normally offered first to the Jews – Paul's mission begins in the synagogues – and only after rejection is offered to the Gentiles. Luke may also have seen the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, of which these two disasters could be seen as a foretaste, as a consequence of the people's failure to follow the way Jesus opened to them.

Both passages also tackle the reality that life can be tough. Jesus, in Luke, suggests that suffering and disaster often just happen; we shouldn't be looking so much for explanations as for meanings to be found and lessons to be learned. Paul suggests that we'll never be asked to bear more than we are capable of bearing.

It is said that we live in a hyper-critical, risk averse society which likes to apportion blame for anything that goes wrong. However, our so-called 'blame culture' appears to ignore the fact that it is impossible to assign blame for certain (tragic) events, which can be a reminder that while God is sovereign, we still live in a fallen, broken world.

Many people blame God for disasters. When earthquakes kill thousands, volcanoes spew lava and ash onto villages below, floods sweep away settlements, airplanes are deliberately driven into towers or suicide bombers destroy thousands of people, many say they cannot believe in a God who lets this happen. But this is not the answer. Floods, volcanoes, earthquakes are all part of the creation of the earth. Calamity is no respecter of persons. Technology now exists to build safe buildings in earthquake zones, but people try to save money by not using it. Many live on volcanic slopes and in flood zones, closing their eyes to the dangers or unable to afford anywhere safer.

Jesus did not say why tyrants are given free rein or towers fall. Suicide bombings and murder are not God's fault but we, as humanity, have sinned by allowing poverty, inequalities and injustice to exist. Jesus'

response challenges us all to repent to turn again and to allow Jesus the gardener to lovingly tend and nurture us to allow the good fruits to grow from us to help bring his kingdom into being.

The urgency for us to bear fruit and to bring in the kingdom is perhaps greater now than at any time in the last 80 years. The world appears more fractured than ever and those on the margins of society are more disadvantaged than ever. Now is the time for the people of faith to accept the invitation and come to the table. The sooner we assume our identity as God's children, the better; the more likely we are to produce the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Such things take time to grow, best tended to as soon as possible.

**Fr Bill Addy**