

## **'Time of Change' in the Croydon Circuit**

### **Thoughts for Lent 2010**

**by Harvey, the Superintendent minister**

Sunday 7 March

Lent 3 A strange and dark note:- 'Unless you repent, you will all perish!'

Guiding text: Luke 13:1-9

- Introductory thoughts:

Our previous two Sundays have looked at:

1. Temptations, struggles and longings in the desert, and
2. the impact of dying for the Love for Jerusalem.

Today, the Third Sunday in Lent, our guiding text contains some of the most ferocious words Jesus is recorded as having spoken – *'Repent, or perish!'* Both words are very strange, dark and harsh; 'repent' is usually understood in a way that is a judgemental command, and 'perish' emphasises our extinction, disposal and rejection. So how can such things help us to make a good Lent? And how can we relate them to the Mission and life of our Croydon Circuit?

- First pointer

Two horrendous incidents

It is important to begin by facing up to the fact that our Bible narrative describes two horrendous incidents – the first, a bit of classic Roman brutality from our well-known figure of Pontius Pilate, rather like a state-sponsored act of terrorism; the other, a horrific disaster with people killed by a falling building, reminiscent of the terrifying fate of so many people following the recent devastating earthquake in Haiti.

You'd expect Jesus to be sympathetic! Surely, you think, he's lost it this time. What can he be talking about? 'Unless you repent, you'll all perish in the same way!' Whatever does this mean?

- Second Pointer

The Gospel has a sharp and hard edge

Listen to Tom Wright again: 'Then, as the crowd murmurs in dismay and people look at one another, frightened and horrified, you begin to put it together. Jesus has been talking about God turning the world upside down. He has been doing things that have forced you and your friends to conclude that he really is the Messiah (the promised anointed One), even though he is not doing the specific things you thought a Messiah would. And in and through all his teaching there has been *a strange*

*and dark note*: that he has indeed come to rescue God's people, but that there will be many people who won't want to be rescued, not by him, or not in that way. What on earth will happen next?

So, at the heart of our church life and our life of discipleship there sounds a strange and dark note: the trouble is that it is far too easy to expect the Christian Gospel of Good News to be entirely comforting, soothing and relaxing, a bit like a theological 'smooth classics at Seven' (Classic FM) experience without any hint of discomfort or dissonance.

- Third Pointer

How do we hear this harsh message?

These harsh words of Jesus need to be heard correctly, and I suggest they should be heard as though they are being expressed musically to us; imagine Jesus sounding his strange and dark note to us by singing his warning message to us! Imagine him hammering out his message of freedom for the prisoners, hammering out by declaiming dramatically and operatically good news to the poor and sight to the blind! And here Jesus is hammering out a warning with all the passion of a dedicated singer lost in a musical performance of a life-time, with all the edge and mixture of disturbing and painful sounds!

- Fourth Pointer

Christ never wants peoples' lives destroyed

Let us make no mistake – Jesus' warnings in this text are very stark and specific. But his hammered-out warnings are not to be heard as vindictive or hostile. Christ never wishes to see peoples' lives destroyed. Jesus is here acting like a fire officer trying to wake up people who are deep in a drugged sleep in a building whose lower floors are already ablaze. 'If you don't get up, you're all dead!' he is declaring at the top of his voice. Yelling with a shrill voice at the sleepers is not unsympathetic – it's the kindest thing you can do!

- Fifth Pointer

But what was the problem? What did Jesus want them to 'repent' of?

To begin with, we can remember that ever since his opening sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4, alluded to above), Jesus had been telling people things most of them didn't want to hear. His message about proclaiming the 'acceptable day of the Lord' aroused the ire and wrath of his hearers – so much so that they tried to lynch him! So many of Jesus' hearers wanted a 'rabble-rousing, let's-go-and-bash-the-Romans' sort of leader. But much to their surprise Jesus went about healing people, talking about a few seeds producing a lot of fruit, and warning the rich and the self-righteous that their cosy world was under judgement.

And in all this Jesus could see, perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, that Israel was poised on a terrible knife-edge. One false move, one classic piece of anti-Roman protest or activism, and the Romans would come and stamp on the nation once and for all – just like Pilate!

- Sixth Pointer

A desperate appeal

Jesus in his harsh warning with its note so dark and strange to our ears ('repent or perish') is a desperate appeal to save his people. As we know, Jesus was to go ahead and take the full force of Rome's anger onto himself. We are being called, with the voice of Jesus echoing and appealing to us, to follow his way of weakness, humility, forgiveness and submission – the way of the cross. If we don't – if we don't 'change our ways', i.e. repent, preferring to embrace the way of violence that Jesus has set his face against – then we are effectively signing our own death warrant.

The final words of our text for today powerfully declare that the fruitless tree is asking to be cut down. Stern situations need stern warnings!

- Concluding remarks

So for us in the Circuit, 'repentance' can have a political as well as a personal significance. We must ask – are we in our Churches building up places of defence and security against the hardships of the community and world about us (like so many of today's organisations and political ideals), or are we 'changing our ways' and laying down our lives for the sake of the world and community around us?

Similarly, in our personal lives, is our spiritual development following ways of security, defence, certainty and comfort, or can we 'repent' and change our direction and lay down our lives for the sake of others? As Bonhoeffer writes – 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die!'

So, for this third Sunday in Lent, we must ask how we are responding to Jesus' strange, dark and ferocious call to us – 'repent or perish!'

Are we prepared to risk taking up the Cross and following Jesus' way, or do we prefer to perish? Stern situations need stern sounds and notes of warning!

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