Jesus and Tragedy
Luke 13:1-9

If you were here last week you'll remember Jesus saying that rather than bringing peace he had come to bring division and the fire of judgment. You'll remember him taking the crowd to task for not understanding the times and we heard him warn the crowd to settle their debt with God before it is too late.

But that provokes something in the crowd, because as Luke tells us in v1, at that very time some present told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And in answering them Jesus highlights first the wrong response to such tragedies, second what the right response should be, and thirdly, through the parable of the fig-tree, what God's response to all this is.

The Wrong Response to Tragedy
So Jesus has been talking about the judgment to come and understanding and rightly interpreting the times, and the fact that we are all spiritual debtors to God, and for some in the crowd that brings up in their minds this event when Pilate slaughtered some Galilean Jews whilst they were offering their sacrifices.

Now, the only sacrifice where the individual offered the sacrifice themselves, the only sacrifice where it would have been possibly for their blood to be mixed with the sacrificial animal's blood, is the Passover sacrifice, when each family would sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood on the doorposts of their house. And so it seems that the occupying Roman forces, under Pontius Pilate's authority, slaughtered some Galileans as they were celebrating the Passover feast, the very feast that remembers God delivering the people from foreign oppressive forces.

And to the Jews this would have been one of those events that gets seared into a nation's psyche: an act of shocking violence that assaults all decency. It would have been their equivalent, on small scale, of 9/11 or the Columbine shootings or the massacre of young people on the island in Norway. It was the kind of event that leaves a nation reeling and questioning.

And some at least in the crowd were wondering, or even suggesting, that the victims must have had it coming to them. To die such a horrible death, they must have deserved it. Surely, if you needed evidence of the fire of God's judgment falling on someone this was it. As one commentator [Wilcock] has said their response is, 'no smoke without fire… [and] no suffering without sin.' To suffer like that, this must have been God judging them.

And Jesus effectively asks 'is that what you are thinking? That they died because of their sin?' v2: 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered this way?'

And then Jesus proceeds to bring up another incident – and he reminds them of the tower collapse at Siloam, when 18 people died. Now Siloam was a reservoir area for Jerusalem, near the city walls; and around this time a number of aqueducts were being built to get more water flowing into the city. So this tragedy may simply have been a scaffolding tower collapsing, killing the workers, or one of the supporting towers itself. Either way, 18 people died in a seemingly pointless accident. Or maybe it wasn't pointless, maybe these were builders and

labourers collaborating with the Roman authorities on this project. So maybe they deserved to die. Or if not, just the pointlessness of their deaths must have meant that in some way they were reaping what they had sowed, weren't they? That somehow God was punishing them for their sin.

And again Jesus asks the crowd, 'is that what you're thinking?' V4, 'do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?' And when Jesus calls them offenders there, he uses an interesting word – literally it means debtors. Do you think that they were bigger debtors, more in debt to God than you or anyone else if this happened to them?

Now, if that was what they were thinking, they weren't alone, because that is what people thought. If something bad happened to you, you must *somehow* have deserved it. When Job lost everything, when his business collapsed and his children were killed, and his health broke, his so called friends came to him and said, (Job 4:7): 'remember: who that was innocent ever perished?' Admit it Job, you must have sinned, we know you must have sinned, because the innocent don't suffer like this. And Jesus encountered just such attitudes in his ministry. John tells us of a time when Jesus and the disciples met a man who was blind from birth and the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:2). I mean for something bad like that to happen to that family, someone must have done something to deserve it, Jesus.

Now on the face of it, you might think that kind of response to tragedy rather primitive. But before we fall prey to what CS Lewis called Chronological Snobbery, is such a response restricted to the past – the kind of thing only so-called primitive people engaged in? And the answer is, 'no'. When some new natural disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina, or the Haiti earthquake strikes there is always at least one voice saying, "well, this has happened because…" followed by a list of the victims' sins and why God is right to bring it upon them.

But let's bring this closer to home, and forget the big events that make the headlines. What about our own lives? Do you ever find this kind of response lurking in your own heart and your own thinking? Think about the individual tragedies of life, or the day in day out difficulties of life. Isn't it tempting sometimes to think, when your life goes bad, God must be mad at me. Is this happening to me as some kind of punishment?

When you or a loved one gets cancer, or you lose your job, or your baby is born brain damaged, or your child dies in a car accident, what is our reaction to such events then? God, what have we done to deserve this? And if things aren't working out, and your career stalls or school is difficult, does it mean he doesn't care, that this Christian faith thing isn't worth it, that it doesn't work, because 'I've tried to be good and for all my efforts I just get given bad stuff'?

Or think about the inverse of all this: Do you tend to see blessing and prosperity and health, as reward for good behaviour, rather than as gifts of his grace? That if things are going well for you, well, that's because you've earned it, and he owes you one. But when he takes it away, where does that leave you?

And Jesus says that is the wrong response to tragedy. Can tragedy and suffering and death be as a result of personal, or even national sin? Sure it can. The Bible is clear that all suffering and all death and all tragedy ultimately has its roots in the Fall and sin and rebellion against God. But what Jesus is saying here is you simply cannot draw a straight line from tragedy to sin. The Galileans slaughtered by Pilate were no worse than anyone else, and you, Jesus says to the crowd, are no better than they. And the men killed in the tower collapse at Siloam were no more in debt to God than you, and you are in as much debt to God as them.

To respond to such tragedies by pointing the finger is the wrong response, Jesus says. Which begs the question, how should we respond?

The Right Response to Tragedy

Now Jesus could have used these events to score political points against the Romans, or against those in authority and he could have railed against how these tragedies and disasters were signs of the times and this was a nation under judgment and the politicians were to blame. But He doesn't do that. Instead he makes this really personal, and he uses these events to speak to the hearts of the people in the crowd.

He takes these tragedies and he says, this is about you. God is speaking to you through these events. When there are natural disasters or senseless murders, he's talking to you.

You see, Jesus takes universal sinfulness as a given. He is under no illusions about the state of our hearts, or the Galileans' hearts, or the Siloam construction workers' hearts. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), we all deserve death and tragedy, he knows all about my selfishness and self-centredness, and Jesus says, God uses these events to get our attention, to speak to our hearts.

In his book, The Problem of Pain, CS Lewis says that pain is 'God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world'. Prosperity and health can have this soporific effect upon us. The good life can act as an anaesthetic putting us to sleep to the things that really matter. And through these events, God takes up his megaphone, he sends out his wake-up call, to remind us of our own precarious position, of our frailty and mortality, of matters of eternity, and he says, 'This could have been you'.

In his famous poem, No Man is an Island, John Donne wrote the lines, 'send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.' When you hear the funeral bell tolling, Donne is saying, don't sit at home thinking, 'oh, I wonder who died', realise, let it sink into your heart, that one day you will die, that one day the bell will toll for you.

And Jesus is saying, your response to such events shouldn't be to point the finger at *their* sin. Rather, it should be 'let me examine my own heart before God, this could have been me. I could be facing eternity now instead of them.' It shouldn't

be, 'they must have been so in debt to God', but rather, 'I am a debtor in as much need of God's grace as them – what if that had been me?'

You see, Jesus uses these tragedies to call the crowd and us, not to corporate finger-pointing, but to repentance. v3 & 5: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Rather than reinforcing some kind of self-righteous religious pride, such events should teach us profound humility. To reckon with our frailty. To number our days aright and realise we can never know their number. And that will lead us to respond with repentance. And repentance is the way to escape perishing. We do that when we first turn to Jesus in faith, and first become a Christian: we repent and turn to God and away from sin and the world, and we change the direction of our life for the rest of our life. But we also go on repenting. It's not just a one off, done that, ticked the box, got the t-shirt. It's a continuous thing, of correcting course when we stray, of doubling back when we've taken a wrong turn, of putting sin off, when we realise we've put it back on. It's a lifestyle of turning to Jesus and making him the treasure of our hearts.

But what if we don't respond like that? What if we don't heed the warnings of these tragedies? What if someone reads the newspapers and tut-tuts about the latest events, but fails to take note? Or widening it out, what if someone hears the message of Jesus and his call upon their life and his urging them to turn to God in repentance, but they don't do so. If that's you, how does God respond to that? How does God respond to our lack of response?

God's Response

And Jesus tells the parable of the fig-tree to answer just that. A man has planted a fig-tree in his vineyard, expecting to get fruit from it. But for the last three years he has been coming hoping to find at least some fruit, just one or two little figs that would prove to him there is fruit bearing life in this tree, but nothing. No fruit for three years.

And that fig-tree is a picture. It's a picture of the crowd who have heard Jesus, it's a picture of the nation of Israel who have had the promises and the covenants and the prophets, and it's a picture of anyone who has heard the good news of Jesus, but does nothing with it.

How does God respond to that? In three ways:

1. God's Judgment

Firstly, he responds in judgment. V7: 'Look, for three years now' the owner says to the gardener, 'I have come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and I find none. Cut it down.' As we saw last week, just as the debtor is living on borrowed time, so is the fig-tree. Judgment – a cutting down- for the one who won't repent and who doesn't bear fruit in keeping with repentance, to quote John the Baptist, is coming.

But then Jesus throws a twist into the story. God doesn't respond immediately with judgment but with patience.

2. God's Patience

There is a gardener in the vineyard, and he intercedes with the owner to give the tree one more chance: 'Let me tend it, and dig around it and manure it some more, and let's give it one more year.' And that, church, is the patient mercy of God. It is the mercy of God that delays judgment in the words of the apostle Peter, 'not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.' (2 Peter 3:9). It is the patient mercy of God that does not delight in the death of the wicked, but delights to show mercy, that delights in steadfast, patient love (Micah 7:18). As Matthew Henry says, 'if it wasn't for Jesus' - and his patient mercy - 'the whole world would be cut down.' But God delays judgment to give us opportunity to turn.

But the chance to repent does not last forever. Time was limited for the tree - 1 more year, one more fruit bearing season. And for us time is finite; my time is finite and your time is finite. And while we have time, it is His loving, merciful patience. But that time will not last forever.

So God responds with judgment and with patience. But there is a third way as well. God's judgment, God's patience, and God's sacrifice.

3. God's sacrifice

The third way God responds to our unrepentant and hard hearts is to send His son to die for us, to woo us and win us. He uses the greatest tragedy, the cosmic tragedy of His son, crucified under Pontius Pilate, to awaken our hearts to repentance.

You see Jesus becomes the Passover lamb, slaughtered by Pilate and his men at Passover so that his blood mingled with the sacrifice. He became the man who met his death on the scaffolding of the cross. He became the representative tree, and the judgment for our hardheartedness fell upon Him and He was cut down in our place.

That is how God responds to our lack of response. In His grace and His mercy He sends His son to die for us, to take our place, to pay our debt. And that giving of Himself for you tells you that whatever tragedy you might face, it is not because He doesn't love you, or is punishing you, because He has demonstrated in unimaginable ways the depth of His love for you. And knowing that gospel, that Christ has died for our sins, and believing it, and trusting it, and holding onto it in faith, and experiencing the grace of God in our lives in-spite of our heard-heartedness, that this is how much He loves me, even when I didn't love Him, becomes the very thing that warms and softens and melts our hard hearts to turn to Him in repentance and faith. And as we do that, He gives us more of His Spirit to live in us and to start producing His fruit in our lives, making us ever more like Jesus.

So if you are not yet a Christian, there is no better day than today to turn to Him in repentance, and put your trust in Him and not yourself, and to start your life afresh, this time walking in the right direction. And if you are already a Christian but you know you've got off the path and as a result you feel like that tree, no

fruit and a bit of a waste of space, make the decision to turn back today – repent of your sin, and tell Him you've heard His call and you're coming back. And for the rest of us, make this habit of repentance and turning to Jesus and away from sin and treasuring Him in your heart above everything all the habit of your life – that great fruit may result.