

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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GOD OF THE SECOND CHANCE

3rd March 2013

Psalm 68:1-10

Luke 13:1-9

When I was working with young people in the United States I came across a strange superstition, or perhaps it was more of a custom. If we had gathered round a bonfire - maybe to roast sausages, or marshmallows - and the smoke blew in your face, you were told to say "rabbit". This was the magic word that would drive the smoke away. I can't say it worked very well! As is the usual way with such events, we normally ended up smelling of smoke and with smarting eyes, but it didn't matter, because it was great fun.

Last November I took my children to the bonfire and fireworks at Kincaig, which are pretty spectacular and are held in a field beside the A9. The only problem, and it wasn't my problem, was that those driving past on the main road were not only distracted by the sight of flames and fireworks, they were blinded by the great billows of smoke hanging over the road. I gather that they are thinking of how to prevent that this year.

The thing about smoke is that it is a gas. You can't really touch it, and you certainly can't push it aside like a curtain. Yet it is, or can be, thick enough to prevent you seeing clearly, or at all. And it can also impede vision by getting in the eyes and making them smart and water. It would be great if someone came up with a better way than saying "rabbit" to drive smoke away from the places we don't want it. As it is, we usually just have to wait for smoke to disperse in the air. But when it does, especially if you are outside, eventually even the lingering smell disappears and you can't really tell that there had been a fire present.

That is how David the Psalmist envisages wickedness disappearing before God's presence: so that in the end you can't tell it has ever been there. He likens it to smoke being driven away, to wax melting before the fire. If you put wax in the fire, an old candle end, maybe - they make great firelighters! - the flames will blaze for a moment but with a fizzing noise the wax of the candle is consumed altogether. When you clean out the grate there is nothing left to show the wax was ever there. The point David is making is that God's goodness will triumph in this world. Before him, evil will melt away as though it had never been. And so we should offer him songs of joy and praise.

God's goodness is seen in his care for his people - and we are all God's people in one sense, because he made us. He is named as caring for the orphans and widows, those most powerless and vulnerable of people in ancient society. He is named as giving a home to the homeless, and freedom to prisoners, as providing rain in the desert, providing space for his flock and providing food. If you

think God no longer cares for his people, just think of all the provisions in your life - of home and warmth and food and water and friendship and family, and work and leisure. Some people forget to value these things as gifts from God, because they see that other people have also been given them, even those who do not acknowledge God or thank him. But if God chooses to give to even those who do not seem to wish to know him, how can that diminish his gifts to you? Surely it just shows that his love is far broader and deeper than we could ever hope or expect to find.

It is the love of God which Jesus highlights in his parable of the fig tree. And in the little conversation which precedes it, he highlights the universal nature of evil. God, he says, does not grade our wrong-doing. We do. We say that this is a worse wrong than that; that murder is worse than telling lies, that being rude isn't as bad as stealing, maybe. In fact, of course, you remember that Jesus said that to call someone a fool was just as bad as murder. Because wrong is wrong is wrong. And so when bad things happen it is not because the person they happen to, you or someone else, is a worse person than others. Not at all! It is because there is evil in the world, it is because we no longer live in a world as perfect as God intended, and so bad things happen. And yet, this little incident and parable speaks about more than wrong. It speaks about the love of God.

It highlights the love of God, and his forbearance, and his definition of good. If, as the Psalmist says, evil is driven from God's presence like smoke, if it melts in the fire of God's love, then we need to know what that evil is, what it looks like, so that we may not be a part of it. And one way to do that is to look at the opposite of evil, which is, of course, good.

It is tempting to try to make a straightforward allegory out of this parable, but that really does not work. If you make God the landowner, as the most important person in the story, then we have a picture of a harsh and unforgiving God. And that does not accord with other things Jesus teaches. Instead you have to look at the little story as a picture. You have to see the fig tree, maybe old and gnarled and twisted, standing alone in the middle of a field. Maybe that tree is you. Maybe it is the church - this church or the wider church. The wider church has hit the headlines again this week, and as usual, not for the best reasons. Or maybe the tree stands for a nation: in Jesus' day it very likely stood for the nation of Israel, but the great thing about a parable, is that its fundamental meaning applies to all sorts of ages and circumstances across the centuries.

So picture the tree. It may be a fine-looking tree, healthy, leafy. Or it may be a bit withered and have a few branches hanging off. Either way, the owner comes to it looking for fruit. He looks, and he looks, maybe he gets a ladder to check the top branches, but he sees no sign of fruit. Oh, there may be one small withered one, but it has died on the branch and is no use at all. The owner goes away.

The next year, at harvest time he comes again. And the next. But there is no fruit at all. And so he sends for his gardener and says that he might as well chop it down - it will be more use as firewood. The owner, you see, wants some use from his tree. It is not supposed just to be decorative, it is supposed to be good for something, to produce something.

For Jesus the opposite of evil is active good. Evil can be active or inactive, if you think about it. It can be actively doing what is wrong, or it can be failing to do what is right. But good must be active. God expects people to produce fruit, to bring more goodness into the world. There are lots of ways which the Bible uses the metaphor of being fruitful. There is the idea of bringing the good news to others - being workers among God's harvest - which can be in speaking the good news, but is also about bringing news that is good to people, being active in helping, sharing, loving. There is the idea which Paul develops, of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: attributes which are shown in our actions before all else. There is the idea of helping to produce more children for God's kingdom. We don't do these things by sitting alone and folding our hands, saying that at least we are not doing wrong. To do that would be to do wrong, because it would be to opt out of being active in doing right.

If we are not active in producing fruit, God wonders why not. The owner wonders why the tree is not producing fruit. It seems to be a waste of space. But the gardener, who works with the tree, who looks after it, pleads for a stay of execution. Yes, fruit must be produced, there is no arguing with that. But there is even more he can do to help the tree fulfil its function. He can feed it, he can refresh the soil it grows in, he can encourage it. In the end, yes, the tree must become active, must produce fruit, but it need not do it unaided. And it must be given another chance.

And that is the love of God, feeding us, helping us, and giving us another chance to bear fruit for him. God sent Jesus to blow away the evil like smoke, to melt it like wax, and this frees us to put our wrong-doing behind us, to know ourselves forgiven, and so it frees us to act for good. Jesus, as we remember around the table today, acted to win our salvation for us, to prevent our immediate condemnation when we do wrong, and it is only with his help that we can act for good, can do anything that bears fruit for God. But still we are called on to act, to look to our neighbour and see how we can help, how we can show love. To look to our neighbour here in the village, or our neighbour across the world. We are called on as a church to do good, not just to sit, wondering where the rest of the community is on a Sunday, but to be active in befriending people and inviting them to be a part of this worshipping community. We are called on as citizens of a nation to be a light in dark places, and a leaven in the lump. And we don't do that by sitting and doing nothing.

So what can you do? You can pray, that is a very practical action. You can be a friend, where friendship is needed, where no one else is bothering to help. There are people in any community who are harder to be friends with, because they need more work. This week I was cheered to see one such person, who I know is particularly trying just now, being helped into a car by a member of the church community, who obviously was being a friend, was doing good. You can write letters, if that is appropriate. You can do all sorts of things, even when your physical strength is not what it once was there are all sorts of things you can do, and you will do, if you go about your life with the attitude of love and service, not looking to your own affairs first of all.

"Let God rise up," said the Psalmist. God does rise up when his people rise up and are active for him. God does rise up and is honoured when his people show his love and offer to others the second and third chances that God has offered to us. As we gather today around the table, may we thank God for the new start in Jesus that he gives to us over and over again, and as we are nourished by this sacrament, let us ask God to help us produce fruit for his kingdom.