

# Sunday 11 March 2007: The Third Sunday of Lent

## A parable of compassion and crisis

**Readings: Isaiah 55: 1-9; Luke 13: 1-9**

*'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' (Isaiah 55:2)*

In Liverpool there's a rather unusual church. When they closed the large Methodist Central Hall in the city centre a few years ago a newly appointed minister for the city wondered quite what she was going to do with no building and no congregation. Six years on there now exists what has become known as 'The Bread Church'. This is a place where they are working out what it means to be a Christian community around the making, shaping and sharing of bread. The ingredients – of yeast and salt, water, flour and oil combine, giving life, texture, warmth and identity to the bread – something full of wonder – and that's also something of a metaphor for the very mixed community that meets together – students, Big Issue sellers, asylum seekers, office workers.

Each of the ingredients of bread brings something. The yeast brings life to the dough, the oil gives texture and elasticity, the salt slows the fermentation and brings flavour – as I learnt on the only occasion when I ever tried to make bread and left the salt out. The ingredients change each other and to be a good breadmaker the baker needs to understand how they work together and their particular qualities. The breadmakers shape the bread but the bread also shapes the breadmaker. And so too with the community of the church.

Bread is a most basic element of matter in which the Bible is steeped. Think of the phrases that are so familiar to us 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you' the Lord said to Moses 'one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord', 'the ravens brought Elijah bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening', 'send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back'. The devil tempted Jesus to 'command these stones to become loaves of bread' and every time we say the Lord's Prayer we repeat the words 'Give us this day our daily bread'. In St John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as 'the bread of life' and this morning in the eucharist we'll listen to the words of how Jesus took, broke and gave the bread and we'll receive it and see it and touch it and taste it. Unfortunately, we're unlikely to be able to smell it but we may well hear it. An article of matter, so basic, so simple, so obvious and yet so profound. Surely, part of the scaffolding of our spirits. 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' And yet we need to remember that scaffolding is not intended to be permanent. It's there while something is built and so we're sent out, into the world, after receiving the bread.

And money – scripture is also shot through with references to money – to coins, to alms, to interest and lending. The Bible is very earthy in that way – it doesn't float above the issues which we might sometimes feel to be not very holy. It engages with the practical necessity of urban and indeed trading life.

But first Isaiah relates, everyone who thirsts is invited to come to the waters including those that have no money – come, buy and eat! All, including those with the fewest means, are invited to a joyful banquet. We're given here a picture of a water seller announcing his presence. Normally

we can assume, he'd be looking for payment, but this time the offer is of free water, and wine and milk because God doesn't look for payment for what he gives to us. There's all the generosity of banquet here, all who need are welcome, and yet it's coupled with a question – why we spend what money we may have on the things that don't really satisfy us?

The offer of a free banquet must have felt like something of a miracle to the Jewish exiles who'd experienced hard times, limited food and physical and spiritual hunger and thirst. Perhaps at first it had something of the sense of a mirage or one of those thoughts that turns out to have been nothing more than a dream. But it was real and God doesn't look for payment for his gifts to us but perhaps he does hope that we take the opportunity to re-consider our ways. In this passage we also find the Lenten theme of penitence. 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?'

Isaiah pleads for a renewed set of values in his society. He acknowledges the realities of life – that there are some who have very little or nothing at all – and we can see that for ourselves only feet from where we're sitting. He wants to make the point that there is something that can make a difference to all our lives – whatever our means might be. There are things that don't cost money and yet sustain. Now, that may sound a bit reminiscent of Marie Antoinette's 'Let them eat cake' but Isaiah was a realist. God said 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant'. When Isaiah speaks of God offering the people a covenant, like all the prophets he saw such a covenant as extending through the whole of society. If God covenanted with the whole people of God that meant that every part of the people covenanted with every other part. His great vision was of a society full of justice.

He calls, not for a spirituality that ignores the realities of the world but a renewal – a scaffolding perhaps – which has consequences, in thought and action – so that those who need bread will have it. It's a passage which still speaks into our own society and to us, as individuals. What are the values of the society we want to build and what part can the church play in that? Money in itself is neither good nor bad but it becomes dangerous if used as a purpose for living. That is a sad and limited goal with the potential for much damage but, used well, as a scaffolding for the spirit, it can help to sustain the fundamental health of society. And money has always been part of the 'matter' of the life of the church since its earliest times.

Indeed the church isn't alone in that. Historically, rabbinic leaders, basing their thoughts on biblical precedents, developed frameworks – scaffolding even we might say – for the regulation of financial and monetary matters so that they had a practical, ethical dimension. They wanted to nurture a spiritual stance towards money, a way of 'being with' money so that it became, not an end in itself, but a medium – an item of matter – through which honesty and goodness could be practised. Giving was an important element of this and a 12thc rabbi, Maimonides, worked out an eight point scale of giving. It began with 'giving that was grudging, reluctant or done with regret' – but even that was acceptable because who knew what transformation that giving might bring about once the act was done and then it moved through 'giving before one is asked' to 'giving anonymously' right up to the eighth level which he defined as 'the act of someone who, through a gift helps another to become self-supporting'.

To reflect on how we use whatever money we have can be a useful and helpful discipline, especially perhaps, if we think of it in the light of those words 'Why do you spend your money for that which does not satisfy?' What are the things that have really satisfied you?

And how do we care for the fig tree? At first sight this is a strange little parable, perhaps not one that we read very often and it follows some pretty harsh words about repentance and judgement. Much of the early verses of the passage could have come straight from an Old Testament prophet – Jesus at his prophetic best. The whole nation is sick, he says, and uses what seem to be contemporary illustrations to demonstrate that. Unless the nation repents, God’s anger will descend and the hard-hitting parable of the fig tree suggests that it may already be too late. Like the saying that those who decide to repent at the eleventh hour may die at ten-thirty!

It’s a parable that is both urgent and somewhat alarming. The tree is planted in a favoured position but it fails to produce figs. It takes nutrients from the soil but gives nothing back. Perhaps the extra time it’s given is a sign of God’s mercy but it feels as if his patience is running out and that this is a reluctant last and temporary reprieve.

This is a tough, challenging story – probably right for Lent. The unfruitful fig tree – given the last chance to respond to special treatment – but if it doesn’t respond to God’s mercy then the alternative may be to discover a limit to his forbearance and that runs counter to the endlessly forgiving God that we may prefer to think of – the God who forgives and forgives and forgives.

So what might it be saying to us? Like the fruit tree we’re given life for a purpose – to bear fruit of some kind. What that might be will be different for each of us but if we’re not to end up like the barren fig tree our fruit needs, not only to grow, but to be distributed and shared. The owner of the vineyard and the gardener had different responses – the owner judged more swiftly than the gardener but even the owner had waited for three years. God waits for us to emerge and to start bearing fruit. He gives us opportunities but there comes a moment when a choice has to be made. We have a part to play in tending the tree that it might be fruitful – to tend and use well those things that God has given us.

This is both a parable of compassion, to encourage us as we stumble along the way and give us another possibility of receiving God’s forgiveness, but also of crisis, to stir us up. And it leaves us in an ambiguous place because we’re not told whether the fig tree, given one more year, actually does bear fruit or not. We don’t always know and our experience probably tells us that we can’t always expect to know, the results of what we plant. Few of us will be likely to see the full fruits of the building project for example which may take decades to emerge. But we can still hope to be part of the rich banquet provided by God’s generosity –

‘Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters  
and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!’