


Third Sunday of Lent C — St Helen's Church, Abingdon
23 March 2025



Isaiah 55.1–9 / 1 Corinthians 10.1–13 / Luke 13.1–9

Do you think that... they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

JUST *HOW* SINFUL do you suppose those unfortunate Galileans were? Jesus asks if they were *worse* sinners than anyone else, the worst in Galilee, so they evidently weren't saintly examples of good citizenship; but on the other hand, he answers his own question by saying 'No, they weren't worse sinners', which only makes sense since his question loses its punch if the victims were *indeed* the worst. The point of Jesus's question lies in the Galileans being *middling* sinners, ordinary citizens going about their business, just as — let's be candid, here — just as many of us this morning are middling sinners, ordinary citizens.

And just as you and I, middling sinners, have come to church this morning, doing our religious duty, so also the Galileans seem to have been on *their* way to make sacrifices in the Temple when they were cut down by Roman soldiers, slaughtering them and the animals they'd brought for sacrifices, too. Pilate sent a counter-terrorism squad barrelling down East St Helen's, brutalising anyone in their way, killing a handful of our faithful who were on their way here for Holy Communion. Were they worse sinners than all the other Abingdonians?

No, says Jesus. Things like that happen all the time, to everyone; as he says in St Matthew's Gospel, 'God makes the sun rise on the evil and on

the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.’ Misfortune is an equal-opportunity affliction; we don’t *earn* bad news by misbehaving, and we don’t *earn* blessings by behaving well.

Now, St Luke uses this to deliver show us Jesus warning us: ‘Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.’ But as you may have noticed, that *contradicts* his lesson about equal-opportunity disaster. And we all *will* perish as they did, sooner or later, whether we repent or not. Unrepentant attitudes do not provide a short-cut to immortality! (St Luke has a habit of pairing *teaching*-sayings of Jesus with parables that don’t match up tidily, so we shouldn’t be surprised if he takes up

Jesus certainly warns us that we ought to repent, that we don’t have all the time in the world to set our affairs in order — but that doesn’t apply only to the worst sinners. All of us ought to repent; all of us ought to lean into *trying harder*. ‘Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.’ But the free gift of grace doesn’t come only to those who accomplish a certain threshold of penitent works of charity. Isaiah tells us right at the beginning of this morning’s prophecy: ‘you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.’ You can’t buy salvation with pious goodness. There’s no price for the bread of heaven; no money can buy the spiritual drink that gushes up to eternal life.

Yet it seems as though there *must* be some correlation between our goodness and God’s mercy. If there weren’t, why would we repent? Why do good, if we don’t receive a reward, and especially if we see the *unrepentant* crooked villains getting richer and richer while we struggle to make ends meet? Jesus answers: ‘Just how righteous do you have to be, then? How good is good enough?’ We can’t answer him without considering ourselves, and once we take ourselves into consideration,

well, *no one* would consign *themselves* to eternal perdition; but if we draw the line of sufficient righteousness so as to include ourselves and our friends, how can we know that we've drawn it fairly? Would we trust those *other* people — you know the ones I mean — to draw the line to include *us*, or might we be excluded from heaven for eternity because someone else was mortally offended by some minor transgression that we ourselves had almost forgotten about?

For all these reasons, I am thankful that God alone is judge. And for all these reasons, *plus* the knowledge of my own sins, I am thankful that God makes the rain to fall on the just *and* the unjust, that calamitous accidents happen to Galileans and Abingdonians not on the basis of *deserving* them, but on the familiar random basis of lightning strokes and changes in the weather. Indeed, I am *thankful* that God embraces all who turn to him in hope, no matter how obnoxious or undeserving they may be, because I know well that *I* am obnoxious and undeserving from more than one other person's point of view.

This is what makes *grace* 'grace'. And we can't slice and dice it, can't have grace for *me* without grace for *thee*, and we can't deny it to undeserving swine unless *we're* willing to be judged without mercy ourselves. Are they, as Jesus would ask, worse sinners than all the other Abingdonians?

The desire to have good things for ourselves while denying them to others marks the defining symptom of someone who refuses grace. And only those who refuse grace will be *excluded* from grace, from the invitation to eternal life that extends to everybody who's willing to accept it. Everyone. *Everyone*. Them, too. The only way to be excluded is not to accept the invitation.

If we want to reserve to *ourselves* the prerogative to pick and choose whom God blesses, we make *ourselves* the judge instead of trusting God. That's the hard part of our hearts that Jesus longs to soften, to soothe;

that hard-heartedness will keep us holding back from solidarity with the wrong sort of people, who turn out to be the people God forgives and heals. We may not like it; we may believe we know better than God; but as long as we hold on to our conviction that we don't want solidarity with forgiven sinners, God will permit us to stand outside the gates of heaven, like the jealous brother in Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son standing outside the party for the Prodigal.

We *middling* sinners — not worse sinners than any other Abingdonians — bring our sacrificial stewardship offerings to St Helen's this Lenten Sunday, without the slightest fear that the local constabulary will turn on us. We repent, lest we perish without the charitable, generous heart by which God calls and embraces and forgives *us*. We come together in a spirit of repentance, hoping that God will increase in us the holiness that wants holiness for everyone else, that wants everyone else to crave and to cherish God's loving kindness as much as we love and cherish God. We come together looking forward in hope to a day, an *eternal* day, when we will eat richly and drink wine without cost, sharing that gracious abundance with all sorts and conditions of our neighbours, holy and profane, noble knights of faith and arrant knaves of felony, low and high together, bringing our sacrifices before God's altar...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen