

Coventry Cathedral

Lent 3

23/3/25

Isaiah 55:3–9

Luke 13:1–9

‘No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity’ (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Jesus in today’s Gospel refers to two terrible disasters (one an accident, one a political massacre) that had happened recently. A key word in what he then says is the tiny word ‘as’. It’s a tiny word but a massively important one, because it’s the key to drawing analogies between different experiences and between different people:

‘Unless you repent, you will all perish *as* they did’.

Professor Lilie Chouliaraki, who occupies the LSE’s chair in Media and Communications has just published a book called *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood*. It is a fascinating description of how a growing number of moral arguments are being conducted today.¹ More and more, they centre on appeals to victim status. Victim status, Professor Chouliaraki argues, is constructed from two modern notions: trauma and rights. When there has been some sort of trauma it is attributed to the fact that some sort of right has been infringed. And sometimes the infringement of a right is, on its own, seen as a sufficient cause of trauma.

To establish yourself as a victim is then to have a claim on society for better treatment, and, perhaps, for restitution. This is having the effect that all across the political spectrum, from left to right, different individuals and groups are declaring their oppression and the injustices done to them. Abuses of power and privilege are identified, but in hugely various places. It doesn’t end with white, male, monied advantage (though there is plenty of that); we are now

¹ I am grateful to Andrew Brown of the *Church Times* for alerting me to this book, and for his critical appraisal of it.

hearing many voices that claim they are the victims of restrictions on free speech because they can't say what they want to on public platforms, and that an unduly powerful political-cultural establishment is responsible for silencing them.

'Languages of pain have become key strategic resources for any group', Professor Chouliaraki writes. 'It is about claiming domination.'

And the culture of victimhood is thus a form of bidding war, for what are perceived to be scarce resources (whether government funding or air-time in the mainstream media).

Faced with this, I think we are right to ask ourselves some hard questions. Where will it end? At the heart of the Christian message is a call to defend the vulnerable, to seek justice for the oppressed, and to set the captives free. Restitution matters; reparations have their place. But if this has the practical effect of licensing a forever war of aggrieved people making claim and counter-claim against each other (a dynamic that can all too easily erupt into violent civil conflict, as we're already seeing) then something very unChristian will have come to pass.

'Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

What might Jesus's call to 'repent' mean in this context? Well, of course it will include the unsparing examination and correction of ourselves and our traditions and our institutions when we (and they) fail and damage others. This will often, rightly, mean one group 'repenting' by providing restitution to another.

But (as *well* as this), might Jesus's call to repent mean something even more radical: a repenting of the whole culture we have created in which the weaponization of victimhood has become normal; a repenting of the

politicization of suffering, in which different forms of it are made to compete with each other? For in buying into a culture of perpetual grievance, we risk replicating something of the logic of power and rivalry which makes victims in the first place, and which is the opposite of the Gospel (as also, indeed, of everything this cathedral's reconciliation work stands for).

This does—of course—require ongoing acknowledgement of the need for justice, and the importance of redress, and (frequently) the urgency of change—on so many fronts. But it also requires us to ask: 'what then?'; 'what will such justice, or reparation, make possible?'. It means holding fast to our hope for, and imagination of, a world in which reconciliation can happen.

Unless we 'repent' of our present way of doing things—by hoping for and imagining a radical reconciliation, which is not the bypassing of justice, but its purpose—then, to echo Jesus's words, 'we will perish as they did', in a fractured world in which towers are shoddily built, and rulers butcher their subjects.

What we need is to find new ways to be in common. Suffering must lead, ultimately, to solidarity rather than to civil strife. We need to think about how to become each others' resources, for repair and healing.

We could start by working harder at imagining ourselves in the shoes of others. That's something that is often called empathy. I also like to think of it in terms of thinking by analogy; thinking with the help of the little word 'as'.

Lots of art does this. The Last Supper, for example, (and especially Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated version of it) has been adopted by countless groups as a site for bringing their own identity into view: queer people, Black people, female visual artists, even young national servicemen—the list could go on—have been depicted, or have depicted themselves, at Christ's table. A huge range of different cultures and perspectives comes into view in this adaptation of a

famous image. But, at the same time, the appeal to a shared visual trope (which is in turn the image of a common table) is an expression of commonality; of shareable experience and tradition.

In another example that I love, the female Jewish artist Leni Diner Dothan filmed herself breastfeeding her infant in a work entitled *Sleeping Madonna*. She was dressed as the Virgin Mary and framed in a Renaissance archway on a throne-like seat (that is, like a classic Madonna and Child) but she depicted the process as the actual exhausted propping-your-eyes-open-in-the-middle-of-the-night experience that it really is. She is barely able to keep awake in the video.

As a Jew, Dothan has borrowed and adapted a Christian motif to explore her own experience—by way of analogy. And in doing so, she helps us to think of the Virgin Mary ‘as’ a tired Jewish mum too.

Works of art like this are a reminder that much art is, actually, the fruit of empathy (as well as a means of fostering it).

A problematic tendency of many religious traditions, and individuals, is to think in ‘them and us’ terms. Indeed, it’s a tendency in human nature more generally; not just a preserve of religious people. My worry about the politics of victimhood, with which I began, is that it can tend the same way.

Jesus challenges this tendency in today’s Gospel. He addresses head-on what seems to have been the conclusion that some were drawing, that the victims of these events were different from themselves (for instance, that they must have had it coming to them; that they must have been especially bad people). That would be to make ‘them’ distinct from ‘us’. But—though in rather tough and unsettling terms—Jesus responds by saying: recognize that you are *like* them:

Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

The answer is 'no'. This is, it seems to me, a hugely significant riposte to some forms of Christianity that have what's sometimes referred to as a 'prosperity Gospel' (which says that you can tell whom God favours by the fact that their lives go well and they have many material blessings (and no disasters)), as well as those in our current political climate who say they are uniquely in need of scarce resources because there is no suffering like their suffering.). In both cases, we are confronted by a false gospel, because it is partisan and proprietorial.

And, again, let's learn from Jesus's encounter with the fruitless fig tree. This is not just an image of some other group of people than us—some convenient group we consider especially wicked and want to demonize. It is an image of us all. As the greatest of all early theologians, St Augustine, put it 'this tree is the human race'. And he goes on to stress the deep continuity of ancient and modern experience of the one true God:

The Lord visited this tree in the time of the patriarchs, as if for the first year. He visited it in the time of the law and the prophets, as if for the second year. Here we are now; with the gospel the third year has dawned.

We need to take responsibility for our sins and do something about them: to repent! But ultimately it will not be enough to repent just individually or in separate groups, or to seek to make others repent just individually or in separate groups. We need to repent in common, for the sake of being in common. We need to be more radically mutual. We need to take each others' suffering, and our own, more seriously than we do when we treat it transactionally, as a bid for power, or resent it in others for just the same reasons.

'Let us dig a ditch around it', says the vinedresser in the parable of the fig tree. 'Let us apply a load of manure; perhaps it may bear fruit'. For Augustine, manure signified humility. Perhaps humility is a key to repentance at this deep,

structural level, where we move from necessary considerations of redress to true reconciliation. Humility (this spiritual manure) may be what will allow Christ, who is 'the gardener of our souls' to fill us with 'holy seeds so we may produce fruits for him' (Cyril of Alexandria).

Jesus asserts what you might call 'solidarity in sin'. We are all in it together. That's a fairly serious call to humility. But is it gloomy? Well not as gloomy as it might initially seem, because at least it affirms *solidarity*, and where there is solidarity there can be relationship, mutual regard, and (yes) empathy.

Relationship and mutual regard are also a hugely important idea in our first reading, so in closing let's attend to that.

In Isaiah God speaks of making an everlasting covenant with his people. But, here too, there is not a simple 'them' and 'us' dynamic in operation. It's not: I will make a covenant with *you* and the rest of those nations out there can go to hell. On the contrary, God does a very interesting thing in speaking of this everlasting covenant. He says, effectively, 'it's yours but you have to share it'. And he chooses—to my mind very surprisingly—he chooses *David* as the embodiment of this covenant principle.

Not Noah, not Abraham, not Moses—but David. Why? Because David was 'a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples'. Note that important plural: *peoples*.

And in this spirit, the people of Israel are to see themselves as related to those beyond themselves. Those others are not simply outside the covenant; they have some sort of relation with it.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you...

There is a solidarity to be explored here, in the name of the God who is not reducible to anyone's pet God. The God who is bigger than all of us:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

We stand in solidarity under the God who made heaven and earth. In ways that we cannot fully comprehend, we are all in this together. And though there may be solidarity in sin, there is a greater and more wonderful solidarity than that: solidarity in this God's covenant mercy and love.

So we are never to think that what happens to those people over there has nothing to do with us, or that what that other group gets up to is of no relevance or concern to us. Or that the bad things that have happened to us are best understood as a way to manoeuvre ourselves into a position of competitive advantage.

We are instead to look for the deeper bonds that bind us; that allow us to learn from one another; to receive from one another; to understand *ourselves* better by seeing through other's eyes, and understand *others* better by putting ourselves in their shoes as far as we can. (Like so many artists.) To see the analogies between us, and to empathise.

For no one can be sure they are outside God's judgement, and exempt from the need to repent. Yet it is also the case that no one is obviously outside God's covenant either. The everlasting covenant of God's steadfast, sure love.