

SERMON FOR LENT 3 | 20.03.22

Isaiah 55: 1-9; I Corinthians 10: 1-13; St Luke 13:1-9



Not surprisingly there have been very few photographs taken of Nazanin and her family since her release on Thursday. They need time to adjust after all that they have gone through. But one picture that has emerged in the press shows Nazanin and her daughter making pizza for lunch. Ordinary pizza – but the kind of activity that she has been dreaming of for all these six years of captivity. And alongside the paper printed one small fact: that since returning to London nearly three years ago, Gabriella now aged 7, has lost nearly all of the Farsi that she spoke so fluently with her mother and her grandparents while Nazanin was in Evin jail.

What else, I wonder, will this family ‘forget’ from this traumatic episode in their lives? Will Nazanin forget the experience of that jail, the friendships she made with other leading dissidents but also the depression that led her to undertake two hunger strikes; the endless attempts to interest the world and the extraordinary resilience of her husband Richard as he - powerless, like any ordinary citizen - sought to move the levers of power both at home and abroad, only to be thwarted time and time again?

Our readings today focus on both time and memory. St Paul in the second reading pleads with the Corinthians, *I do not want you to be unaware of the experience of our ancestors...* There are lessons to be learned from the past which you must not forget: Christianity takes from its Jewish roots the requirement to remember: *do this in memory of me.*

One of the most moving episodes while we were in Tallinn a couple of weeks ago was bumping into a massive street memorial service; candles burning on every conceivable flat surface, spot lights playing on the medieval walls, solemn music being played. I asked someone what it was about, assuming that it was for the people of the Ukraine. No she said (in perfect English), *this is to remember the bombardment of our city in 1944 when this quarter was almost completely demolished by Russian bombing – by the forebears of those destroying Mariopolos, Kiev and Odessa today. We must not forget...* And St Paul's message is equally urgent: *Now these things occurred as examples to us, so that might not desire evil as they did. Desiring evil?!*

Coping with evil has, from the very beginning of time, been an issue which has challenged religious people. It is right there in Genesis 6, before Noah's flood, we read how *the earth is full of violence.* Generation after generation have asked, *But how can a loving God permit suffering?* And the answer is never very satisfactory. Maybe there is no reason for it: it has just always been like that. But somehow that seems a bit of a cop out; we expect a more helpful answer when faced with the wilful pain inflicted on Nazanin or the people trapped under the rubble of a Ukrainian theatre used as a bomb shelter. As people said at the *Time to Dream* consultation: *what do we say when we are challenged with questions such as these?*

So before we deal with St Paul's challenge about desiring evil, we have to ask: but where does evil come from? And the answer is not wholly adequate: stories in Scripture about the devil testing and tempting both Job and Jesus at least personalise the issue but we are still left with asking where the devil got his ideas from – and no one has come up with a good enough answer which is what we are so often left with the one I gave earlier: sin, pain, suffering and evil 'just are'.

Ron Dale tells the story of a missionary in Ohio, talking to Tecumseh, the Shawnee Indian chief. At the end he said: *You and I have one thing in common. We all desire a gracious loving God to trust and worship. What I bring is this: Jesus died to show that we have one...*

And no doubt the missionary would have gone on to talk about how Jesus did that, and so must we. Which takes us to the Gospel story which begins, strangely with Jesus talking about the collapse of the famous Tower of Siloam, when eighteen people were accidentally killed. And he asks, *were they killed because they were worse sinners than others?* No. It was just an accident and nothing to do with how they behaved. Tragedies just happen.

But he then goes all horticultural and starts to talk about fig trees. And without pretending to be an expert, Jesus knows what everyone there knew: that the soil was often pretty poor and so fig trees and apple trees would be grown side by side, anywhere where there was a chance they would thrive. And as Maria and I discovered when we first planted a fig tree in Arlington Square, figs can grow like topsy. We had to leave it in its container so that it didn't take up the whole space! Once I brought it to Church for an all-age service: I couldn't move it now! What Jesus is doing is pointing out is that, once planted, it is up to the fig tree to make best use of what it has. What it shouldn't be expecting to do is to squander the opportunity it has been given and become useless – the absorber of the nutrients in the soil but the producer of nothing. What it doesn't have is the right to be is a drain on everyone else. That is sin. As William Barclay once wrote: *there are two kinds of people in this world – those who take out more than they put in, and those who put in more than they take out. As Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, 'Die when I may, I want it said of me that throughout my life I plucked out a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow'.*

We may not understand where evil comes from, any more than we were able to give ourselves the breath of life in the first place. We inherit both. But as Lincoln reminds us, we are called to do all we can to replace evil with good and not just to sit on our haunches and expect others to do it for us.

But there is one final twist in what has sometimes been called 'the Gospel of the second chance'. A fig tree normally takes three years to mature and produce fruit - and that is the story here. No fruit after three years means the tree is unlikely ever to produce figs. But here there is an appeal: give it one more chance, one more year to come right. It is the story of Peter and of Paul; both were given chances after they had failed and, of course, they both came right. So in our work of mission, here as in all churches, we are in the business of giving people second, third and fourth chances. As the international community has done with President Putin. But if people deliberately seek to hate others and God's appeal goes on being rejected, it isn't his fault or ours if there are no more chances left. We have planted flowers; we have made our appeal. Now the time of judgement has come.