The Third Sunday of Lent – 23 March 2025

Message – Trust in God's love

Creator, Redeemer, Giver of New Life, may our thoughts be your thoughts and our ways your ways. **Amen.**

The commentaries have little to say about today's gospel reading. It is a passage unique to Luke's gospel and it meaning is clear and simple.

The Jews of Jesus day widely believed, as some Christians still believe, that calamities only happen to those who deserve them. Jesus rather bluntly says that, as we are all sinners, we are just as deserving of those calamities as anyone else.

The reward of following Christ is not found in a trouble-free life. The way of Christ is the way of the cross and we are invited to take up our own crosses. In response to the calamities that had taken place in Jerusalem, Jesus described the urgent need for all of us to repent, that is to choose to take up our cross.

Luke balances this with the generosity of God. Like the vineyard owner and the gardener, God gives us multiple chances but there is a limit to how many chances any of us will have. We may also take the story as an image for Judah and perhaps even for humanity.

God is gracious; we are offered forgiveness. God is Just; our actions have consequences.

The call to repentance is explored in today's other readings. Unusually for Lent, our most hopeful passage is the Psalm.

Psalm sixty-three is a call for help from a place of trust in God. It is an expression of a lived out faith. The psalmist faces challenges and in response seeks to know God. A theme that recurs through today's passages.

The passage from Isaiah follows the four servant songs, passages in which we see as foretelling the coming of Christ. Though the prophesy is to Judah, the words are an invitation to all people to follow God's ways and seek God.

It is tempting to interpret the passage as saying that God's thoughts and ways as far beyond our understanding but that is not the thrust of the passage. Rather it is a call to repentance, *'let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;'* God will have mercy and will abundantly pardon those who repent. Our ways and thoughts are to become God's ways and thoughts.

Thoughts alone are not enough; they must be seen in our ways, our actions. Ways alone are not enough; to be authentic and meaningful, they must reflect our thoughts, our values, our love for God and neighbour.

The passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes a similar point. There had been a dispute amongst the Corinthians and the church was split into those who consider themselves strong in faith and therefore able to do anything and those caricatured as weak in faith and therefore avoiding any action associated with belief in idols.

While Paul in places is a little harsh on those caricatured as weak in faith, he ultimately points out that both sides are in the wrong. In today's passage Paul is pointing out that sacramental actions on their own are not enough, they must

be back by seeking to know God. Being baptised and regularly sharing in the Eucharist do not show we are truly seeking God. Both may help on the journey but only if we are truly seeking to know God's thoughts and God's ways.

Paul draws on the example of the Israelites in the wilderness, noting the ways in which, as the people of God, we can see them as both baptised and sharing in the food of God's kingdom. And then, noting that despite this many of them fell short of God's hopes and were judged by God.

Paul argues that those who are strong in faith are not seeing the whole picture, *"'All things are permitted," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are permitted," but not all things build up.' (10:23)* The way of God is the way that shows love and builds others up at all times.

Paul cautions those who are strong in faith to *'watch out that you do not fall'*. It is an invitation to consider whether all that we do in our lives builds up both our own lives and the lives of others. Are there things that you do that detract from your walk with God, things that may draw you into actions that are not life giving for yourself or for others?

The strong Corinthians were happy to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul acknowledges that there is no problem with that in itself but also points to the negative consequences that may follow. It gives the wrong impression to others and it becomes a stumbling block for some who are not so strong in their faith.

Today, we have to ask ourselves whether there are things that we do that communicate the wrong message to those outside of the church. The actions may not be wrong in

themselves but they still communicate a message.

Similarly, are there things that we do that cause problems for other members of our community. Again, they may not be wrong in themselves but they may still wound others.

This is Paul's message to those who see themselves as having a strong faith. Think of others and ensure that you are always showing love to them. See the world through the eyes of those who either have no faith or do not have faith as strong or mature as your own. This is going to be hard work because we can so easily think that it is unnecessary but it is necessary, for others.

For those whose faith is weak, Paul encourages them to have more faith. This encouragement is often misappropriated.

Paul says we will not be tempted beyond what we can endure. Paul is not saying that, with God on our side, the experiences of life can never overwhelm us. Though I would rarely contradict someone who is in the midst of the storms of life and holding on to this verse, it is not saying that the storms of life cannot overwhelm us if we have faith.

Reminding ourselves of today's gospel, bad things happen to everyone. Take bereavement for example, most people can cope with one significant bereavement. We are all remarkably resilient. However, if you then pile on a second and third significant bereavement, all in a short space of time, most of us will be being treated for complex grief. That is not a failure in our faith in God, though we may question God's faithfulness, it is the reality that we all have a limit and life can overwhelm.

In our Lent course last week, talking about anxiety, the image was given of a jar into which each of us can only put so much anxiety before it overflows. The rate at which the jar fills up and size of the jar vary from person to person but all of us have the potential to be overwhelmed.

If we are fortunate enough never to have been overwhelmed in life, we may count our blessings. But, we must also extend the grace and compassion to other to recognise all that they may be coping with.

It is not that life won't overwhelm us; Paul is saying that temptation won't overwhelm us if we have faith in God. This is Paul's encouragement to those who don't feel so strong in faith, *'God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength,'* which elsewhere he makes clear is your strength in God. All of us may face great temptations but God can bring us through them.

The Eternal Word, God incarnate, calls each of us to repent. This means seeking the thoughts and ways of God. Seeking to know God as best we can; making our relationship with God the greatest desire of our lives.

We are called to a difficult path, the narrow way. Knowing God's grace and love for us, we are not to presume to much, while also being able to trust and not needing to despair. As we welcome God's grace, we have the absolute assurance of God's love for us, keeping us from despair. Yet, simultaneously seeking God's face, God's thoughts and God's way, we realise how far we have to travel to be all that God calls us to be.

We journey together, trusting in God's love.