

Isaiah 55:1-9 ‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

³Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

⁴See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples.

⁵Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.’

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord.

⁹‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalm 63:1-9 You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

²I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

³Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

⁴I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵I will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

⁶On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.

⁷Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

⁸I cling to you; your right hand upholds me. ⁹Those who want to kill me will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.’ ⁸We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹We should not test Christ, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! ¹³No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Luke 13:1-9 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’

⁶Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig-tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, “For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig-tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”

⁸“Sir,” the man replied, “leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig round it and fertilise it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”’ Sin and its consequences

There is a complex relationship between sin and its consequences, and judgement, repentance and forgiveness, and we're going to explore that today.

When we talk about the problems of the world, as we do so frequently, we talk of the strife between Israel and Gaza, the ceaseless, hateful reprisals between Israel and Hamas, and the seeming impossibility of resolving such a horrific mess, that has killed more than 40,000 people in the last few years. But what we are talking about is sin.

When we talk about the problems of the world we are talking about the gross inequalities between billionaires and the poorest in society. We see the injustice that Musk, Bezos and Zuckerberg can between them own as much wealth as half of America — 170 million people. But what we are talking about is sin.

When we talk about the problems of the world, we are talking about Global warming caused by western, and increasingly Asian industrialisation, affecting all of us, but affecting the developing world even more damagingly than us — while they are the more innocent parties. But what we are talking about is sin.

Because all of this is as a result of human agency, and all of it could be better if there had been more compassionate choices made by — well, all of us, actually.

There are problems that aren't a result of sin, but if the sin-related problems were fixed, our capacity to solve the others would be extraordinary.

What I am saying, is that despite the modern trivialisation of the word 'sin', reducing it to the calorific value of chocolate, sin is one of the very most significant subjects of the Bible, and the thing that Jesus is tackling in his ministry, his death and resurrection. Sin is everything from genocide to a small lie. It harms our relationships with God, and with each other. It harms our sense of our own self, too.

Sin has consequences. We all know that. It harms the sinner, it harms the people the sin is against. It harms innocent parties who have nothing to do with it — 'collateral damage' as the army say. For example, in safeguarding they talk about 'adverse childhood experiences' or ACEs. Children who experience multiple ACEs are much more likely to have a lower quality of life, and then inflict ACEs on their own children in due course — it's a long term consequence of the damage they have received. Another example is climate change. We have suspected or known that western industrialisation was causing adverse climate change for decades now. But we are collectively so 'plugged in' to this world that it is almost impossible not to be a part of it. As such I'd suggest the biggest single shift required to combat climate change would be a promotion of *virtue* — deliberate striving against sin, because that is the right thing to do.

Now, there has been religion since prehistory, and every religion has had to contend with the problem that if their god were powerful, could he or she not put a stop to sin or its consequences? The answers given have varied — some have supposed the gods were uncaring, no more virtuous than we are. Some that the gods are actively cruel. The Jewish and Christian tradition argues instead that God is both loving and just. This is a wonderfully positive, but if God were just, then why do bad things happen to good people? This is the subject of Jesus's words in Luke 13: 1-9 and also the entirety of the book of Job. Jesus is effectively saying — 'yes, bad things happen to good people, but don't dare to suppose that this has anything to do with God's judgement.' But then he says something really interesting: 'but unless you repent, you too will all perish!' So what's going on there? If you listen carefully, there's a logical fallacy for us to fall into. My 5 year old has a T-shirt that says 'Red pandas are awesome. I am awesome, therefore I am a red panda!' It's easy to fall into the same trap: great sinners deserve for bad things to happen to them. Bad things happened to these people. Therefore they are great sinners!

Jesus has defended the victims of these tragedies — Pilate's murdered Galileans and the others, crushed by a falling tower — from the judgement of the crowd, but he also warns the crowd that *they* are not immune from God's judgement — their presumption and inclination to judge are also sins that have consequences.

So the thing that we, and the people talking to Jesus, can struggle with, is that for the most part God seems to allow the world to run without massive, overt, intervention. But also, God listens to, and answers prayer. But there are no rules that we can discern for when and where and how God answers that prayer. Some people *are* miraculously healed from their ailments. Most are not. When God does not answer prayers with healings it is not a particular judgement on those particular people who are ill, nor on those who have been

praying. When God does answer prayer, it also may not be any particular reward for virtue — but we are still thankful for God's intervention.

If we wanted any proof that God does not especially protect his followers, we only need to look at the early church. Most of the big names in the book of Acts were martyred. Anyone looking for peace and a quiet life through Christianity is looking in the wrong place.

Except: we still believe God is just, but we will know the fullness of God's justice on the day of judgement, and may not glimpse it until then. God is loving, and we *can* know that now, both by reading the Bible and finding his compassion in the gospel story, but also by knowing this through the power of the Holy Spirit. God *does* answer prayer — but instead of protecting Christians from cancer, dementia or some other horror, perhaps God gives us peace to bear these things well, because we know God is there with us in the midst of it.

And God's apparent reluctance to answer every prayer in the way we would have him is also good for the world. If God sorted everything, like a helicopter parent swooping in to save baby time and again we may know God's love, but might not rise to maturity. You see, the world is a mess because we (in the biggest view of 'we') have made it that way. Christian faith isn't about praying that God would fix it. It's about praying and discovering that God trusts us, and that we have to power to fix some of the damage — and then doing it. It's no accident that Christians are so often the founders of charities and often the most generous to those — for example, the Trussell Trust has Christian origins and is disproportionately supported by Christian volunteers and donors.

My sort of conclusion comes in five parts:

- The whole of the New Testament moves us to take sin seriously, to take repentance and God's grace and his love seriously, too.
- Proper (not mawkish) reflection on sin leads us to proper gratitude and joy in God's loving grace *and* a desire to fix the problems — by saying sorry to God and others, and by trying to put it right.
- If we receive God's forgiveness, we should forgive others with as much grace.
- Sin scatters and isolates people — redemption reunites us. That coming together again — unity with God and with each other is just what Jesus means when he says 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full'.
- We cannot change all by ourselves, but Jesus shows us how to get it right, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to change and to put right, to heal the damage to this world.

Amen.