

## **Lent 3, Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries**

**24<sup>th</sup> March 2019, St Mary's, Barnes**

### **Luke 13, 1-9**

Today's Gospel reading refers to two events which were in the news at the time. Some Galileans, worshipping in Jerusalem at Passover, had been killed by Pilate's troops. No doubt, with the huge crowds of pilgrim's present, there had been some civil disorder, and the soldiers had reacted disproportionately. At the same time, one of the temple towers, no doubt in the course of being repaired, had fallen down and killed 18 people. In his response Jesus makes it clear that these people were not singled out because of their special wickedness-rather, the whole society, was askew and heading for disaster. It was a call for people to repent, that is, rethink their whole lives and what they were about.

We sometimes ask why such things happen at all. Why does God allow so much suffering? It is the big question which we all ask at times. The short answer is that we human beings are responsible for most of it, and God has taken the risk of giving us this freedom. Those who rioted and the soldiers who reacted were human beings with choices-as was that terrorist who carried out the terrible attack on Muslim worshippers in New Zealand. And we human beings are responsible for more harm than we are always prepared to acknowledge. Perhaps the tower fell down because it was badly built or carelessly repaired. Perhaps the cyclone that has devastated parts of Southern Africa is partly due to climate change. We human beings have been given, within however narrow limits, real choices, and that is the risk God has taken in creation.

Yet of course there have been and will continue to be what we call natural disasters with no or very little human responsibility. Here we have to fully weigh what it means to be created. To be created is to have a life of one's own, whether it is an electron, a cell, or the

shifting forces that make up wind and rain or tectonic plates. When God said, “Let there be”, he gave everything a life of its own. The miracle is that out of this extraordinary jostling of trillions of elements over 13.4 billion years you and I have emerged with the capacity to be amazed.

A key point about these forces is that they observe what we call the laws of nature. At least above the electronic level they act in stable, regular, predictable ways. And it is this predictability that enables rational minds to develop. If we lived in an Alice in Wonderland world, so that I did not know whether I would suddenly float up to the roof or drop through the floor, rational decisions and thought itself, which depends on being able to plan on the basis of continuity in the fundamental forces of nature, would not be possible.

So, we lift our heads above the burrow of our everyday concerns, blink in amazement, and wonder what it is all about. Why, for example were we formed so bound up with nature, as part of this impersonal material environment? Why we were not just created immaterial and fully formed like angels? We don't know the answer to that but the best guess I know is that the material world acts as a kind of veil between us and God, giving us freedom to make out own way towards him. If we were created in the immediate presence of God, we would be drawn irresistibly to his light. So, God has created us at a kind of distance from himself, that is, a distance of knowing. As Pascal put, there is enough light for those who want to see and enough darkness for those who don't want to see. We proceed only by glimpses and glimmers. We might lament the fact that God is not more obvious. But the situation we find ourselves in means that any small step we take is one on what is very our journey.

So here we are able to think and choose and love and pray, with tiny glimpses of light here and there, and we wonder where this journey of ours leading? The Christian faith teaches that the goal is to grow into God's likeness-to be more like him in self-forgetful love-to reflect and shine with his light. We are made in his image, and we are lured, called, to grow into his likeness. To reflect in however dim a way, his

being of infinite self-giving. And to this end his true image, the likeness itself, has come amongst us in Jesus to associate us with himself, so that we might begin to be changed from glory to glory as St Paul put it.

For all of us like has its difficulties and for many millions' life is very hard indeed, a ceaseless struggle to survive. For we not only face impersonal natural forces but human violence, greed, ruthless self-seeking which distort our life together-all that the church traditionally calls sin. But God does not leave us on our own. In the person of his eternal son he came amongst us in Jesus, and through his spirit is with us still, lifting us out of ourselves into his presence, shaping us in a love for others, and taking us into his own life, a life which death itself cannot destroy.

Joy and woe are woven fine,  
A clothing for the soul divine,  
Under every grief and pine,  
Runs a joy with silken twine.  
It is right it should be so,  
We were made for joy and woe,  
And when this we rightly know,  
Through the world we safely go.

So said William Blake. That joy, that silken twine, is that other dimension to life that fitfully emerges when we lift our head above the burrow and wonder what it is all about and respond to those glimpses of light, the Christ about us and within us, who leads us on, deeper into his life, deeper into our own life, deeper into that eternal life which he has in mind for us.