



Opening Prayer for Lent (Cranmer's *Collect for Purity*)

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you witnessed something that you considered to be God's judgement within a situation. What led you to reach that conclusion?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 63:1 – 8

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves,
and take up their crosses.
God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.
In this quiet space for reflection,
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,
and nothing in life or death or all creation

can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

Readings Isaiah 55:1 – 9
 Luke 13:1 – 9

Sermon

I wonder if you've come across the phrase 'you reap what you sow'? It was quite popular with various of my teachers at secondary school and it's pretty easy to see what they were getting at: how we treated the privilege of our education would have consequences for the rest of our lives. So, if we knuckled down, stayed out of any trouble, and did our best to get good grades, that would put us in a better position in the future than if we messed about, and didn't make an effort with our studies. Generally speaking, they were right; leaving school with few (or no) qualifications does reduce the opportunities available for people, especially these days when there is more emphasis placed upon such things. There are always exceptions – whatever you may think of Richard Branson, Princess Diana, or John Major, they're all people who've had successful careers, or made a significant impact on the world, despite struggling at school. However, for most people nowadays, education is a typical example of 'reaping what we sow', in the midst of everyday life.

Now, this kind of dynamic appeals to a sort of intuition about 'natural justice' that I think most of us carry. We expect that actions will have consequences, meaning those who behave badly will eventually get their comeuppance, and those people who're kind, or hard-working, and so on, will get their rewards. Indeed, this is the dynamic that the author of Psalm 1 appears to have had in mind, when they wrote of

the righteous flourishing and the wicked perishing. It also underpins the plots of many a story – while evil might triumph for a season, we expect good to eventually win the day. However, we also encounter situations where this isn't the case, which then offend our collective sense of natural justice. Thus, when misfortune befalls those whom we care about, we may well wonder why bad things happen to good people. Obviously, the equal and opposite situation might arise, too. Some of you may remember the reaction a few years back, when a convicted criminal out on 'day release' from prison had a big win on the National Lottery – good things happening to bad people has the capacity to offend our natural sense of justice, too.

Today's Bible passages present us with contrasting situations – one of *undeserved suffering* and one of *undeserved generosity*. Looking first to our reading from Luke, we find Jesus and the disciples talking on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus had been teaching the crowds and told them some pretty fiery stuff about the days to come, needing to remain watchful, and the divisive character of his ministry, all during a time of uncertainty and oppression for the people of Israel. Some people, especially those associated with the 'establishment' and the Temple, were concerned to avoid any unnecessary conflict with the Romans and their governor (Pontius Pilate), whose permission they needed in order to exercise their limited authority. Others, including many who'd come before Jesus claiming to be the Messiah, actively sought out conflict. They wanted to violently evict the hated Romans who taxed them heavily, restricted their freedom, and seemed to go to great lengths to cause them suffering and hardship.

Into this explosive atmosphere, Jesus entered, offering them a 'third way' long before New Labour was invented! He himself was steadily shifting ideas about what it meant to be God's people, calling out on the way both the injustices committed by those in authority positions on the one hand, and those pursuing the path of armed rebellion on the other. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus focused his effort

upon calling people to repentance, which was about turning back to God. However, he wasn't into hiding away in a holy huddle; instead, the Kingdom of God was (and still is!) a direct challenge to the ways of the world that oppress, divide and dehumanise people. It was this mission of Kingdom-building that saw him venturing out of the frying pan of Galilee – where Herod's opposition meant even such familiar territory was no longer safe – and into the fire of Jerusalem. And as he made this journey, Jesus refused to backtrack upon those things that had made him so controversial: proclaiming that "the last would be first", telling people to love their enemies, welcoming the outcast and the stranger, and not just *restoring* those pushed to the margins by injustices, but putting them *right at the centre*.

Perhaps because Jesus and his disciples were also wandering folks from Galilee heading up to Jerusalem, we are told that a few people in the crowd approached them, with some potentially disturbing and shocking news – some Galileans had been murdered in the Temple by Roman soldiers, under Pilate's command. Mixing their blood with that of the sacrifices was about deliberately provoking Jewish rebels and establishment figures alike, by polluting the heart of the temple. The recent indiscriminate bombings by Russian forces in Ukraine is probably the modern equivalent of Pilate's brutal deeds. Now, faced with such frightening news, one imagines some of his disciples were tempted to suggest turning around, but Jesus put pay to this idea in emphatic fashion. He questioned whether those innocent Galileans, or indeed eighteen people killed by a collapsing tower in Jerusalem, were really more sinful than anybody else. His answer in both cases was a clear 'no', but with an added warning attached – unless those listening repented and turned back to God, they would be destroyed in the same sorts of ways.

So, what is this passage all about? Well, some commentators argue that what Jesus is doing here is breaking the causal link some were making between suffering and sin. We may suffer because of sinful

actions by other people, like Pilate in this case, or because of events which aren't anybody's fault, like that collapsed tower in Jerusalem. However, this doesn't mean we're any better or worse than anybody else; in other words, this isn't a case of reaping what we have sown, but *undeserved suffering*. However, we all mess up and thus we fail to live lives that fully reflect the love of God, so we each need to turn back towards God as a matter of urgency. That's why, according to this interpretation, Jesus also talks about a fig tree being given more time to see if it yields fruit. Our job is to yield up fruit of love for God, with help and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Another way to read the text connects to the story of Lent, and flows from the context Jesus lived in, which we thought a bit about earlier. The two disasters mentioned are examples of violence: the violence of the state as embodied by Pontus Pilate, and the violence of rebel fighters possibly killed in skirmishes in Jerusalem. Jesus advocates a different way to be based upon hope, and in the end willingly puts his body where his hope is, by choosing the path of the cross. So, within this interpretation, Jesus is the willing victim of our seemingly deep-seated urge to gravitate toward violence. And yet, through the resurrection, his wounds are transformed into the hallmarks of hope and life. I quite like this second position because it moves us beyond systems of injustice and of violence, offering an alternative which is based on *undeserved generosity*. Our Old Testament passage from Isaiah 55 puts meat upon these bones when it talks of all the nations drawing toward Israel because their corporate life is so shot through with God's loving and justice-filled hope that they don't want to miss out! All get to enjoy the rich food of God's Kingdom without cost and so can taste and see for themselves that the Lord truly is good. This is *undeserved generosity*, or in other words, pure and stupendously, deliciously, scandalous grace at work.

So, what might this mean for us today? Well, enjoying the rich foods of God has a spiritual dimension, as I have just indicated, but it also

has a material dimension – what would it look like if all people could enjoy not just having enough to eat, but really good food to eat, that helps them realise that they are worth nourishing? The values of the Kingdom of God run contrary to so much of the received wisdom of the world about us. What if, as an example, poverty and inequalities were to stop being blamed on those who suffer most as a result? In the context of rapidly rising living costs, this is not a rhetorical issue, but a very real one! There is a need for individual responsibility, and for making good choices. But what if we placed less emphasis as a society on assuming that the most vulnerable are reaping what they have sown, and more upon highlighting the socioeconomic violence of a punitive benefit system, rising utility costs, and an out-of-control housing market? Just maybe, God is much better equipped to judge than we will ever be, so we stop trying to compete...

So, in this season of Lent, I pray we might have the courage to ask the hard questions about the connection between suffering and sin, and how a Kingdom perspective might enable all to know that they are worth nourishing. Through us, may all those we encounter taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict
and all those forced to leave everything behind to find refuge.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those impacted right now by climate change,
and all working to support communities at the sharp end.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,
and all struggling to make ends meet in these tough times.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who're excited about the coming of Spring,
and those who are anxious about what lies ahead.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who work for justice in the name of Christ,
and especially the organisations close to our hearts.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are worried about jobs or business,
and all who are bereaved or suffering other forms of loss.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
and in the presence of the Holy Spirit,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent

Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Blessing