

Engaging the Reality of God – Part 3

Lent 3
March 2019

Isaiah 55.1-9

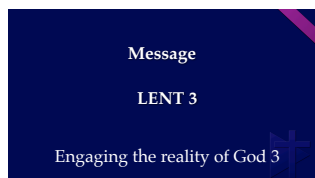
- 1 “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
- 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
- 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
- 4 Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
- 5 Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, or he has glorified you.
- 6 “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;
- 7 let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
- 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
- 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13.1-9

13 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶ And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ ⁸ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”



Introduction:

As I lived through this week my meditations towards this sermon were hard work.

I wanted to bring this as the third message in a series on engaging the reality of God. I am keen for us all to know God personally and live out of that connection. Parts one and two are available on our church website in text and audio.

Then came Monday with the gun murders in an Utrecht tram. This followed the previous Friday when 50 people were shot to death while at Friday prayers in my hometown of Christchurch, New Zealand. This was close to me so when I considered the readings for today I was conflicted between my pastoral desire to encourage people in relationship with God and the need to reflect on evil close at hand.

Extra to this I was asked to clarify things I had said in my first talk about the place of the Bible in relation to encountering God.

Finally the season of Lent hangs around all this as well and it's no accident that difficult challenging readings are presented to us in this lead up to the cross.

With all this alive inside me I thought the place to go to was God.

So I began in prayer, I called on the name of the Lord and confessed myself anew to him.

Then I asked:

Q: Lord, where do I go with all this?

A: When I came back to it all and I remembered something about people and something about Jesus.

Firstly:

- People try to make sense of pain.
 - We are wired for significance and pain without meaning hurts twice as much.
 - Why? Why? How come? Why us? Where is God in this?

And secondly:

- Jesus knows about pain.

With this in mind I turn to the scriptures:

Text A: Luke 13.1-9

We read the Gospel first today because it describes the context of the last weeks in which we live:

There were some present at that very time who told him about:

- the Galileans – people from his place- whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
- those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell and killed them:

This resonates with:

- 50 people cut down by gunfire while praying in Christchurch two Fridays ago.
- 3 people being killed on Monday morning in Utrecht as people rode on a tram.
- Nearly 300 people being killed in at least seven predominantly Christian villages across Kaduna State, Northern Nigeria through February and March with brutal rapes and maiming with machetes.¹

In Jesus' day preparation for worship in one of the temple precincts was viciously attacked Roman soldiers in an ambush set-up by Pontius Pilate. The soldiers had mingled with the crowds and on a given signal turned to knife as many worshippers as they could so their blood flowed in the place of worship. What was this all about?

And then there was an engineering failure, a tower in the city wall collapsed killing 18 people. Why them?

There is pain in the telling of these stories. People are grieving, bewildered at several levels and it hurts so they ask Jesus:

Q: What does Jesus say to them?

A: About those killed while worshipping:

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

A: And about those killed by falling stones from the tower collapse:

“Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

So when people convey real pain and confusion to Jesus he replies purely in terms of how they themselves stand in relation to God.

¹ https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/over-300-nigerian-christians-slain-in-merciless-killing-spree-by-fulani-militants-since?fbclid=IwAR2_doa4ycp2Cnu1SORL4eVtTjI5fMXnrAYqKvqyAlfz3g2MitGJss0UsBY

It's as if Jesus says:

“Bad things will happen, that's this world as it is - accept it. Your concern needs to be to get right with God and his coming kingdom that is breaking in before you now.

Right now you need to be about repenting, turning from sin and transforming yourself from a citizen of this world to a citizen of God's Kingdom. You need a fundamental change of allegiance and concern.”

I can tell you that if Jesus were in ministry his bishop or ministry trainer might say:

“Jesus, what people need is understanding and compassion, not applied eschatology. Until you realize this you are not suitable for pastoral ministry. We suggest you stick to carpentry.”

What I see Jesus doing here is allowing the shock value of what happened to wake people up to the big issue. Are you in alignment with God or are you actually in opposition?

Where do you stand here and now?

Jesus was wanting people to realize that the big issue is not how or when you die, it is whether you are connected or separated from God - now. The shock in this is that your past sin record is not actually a good indicator of that.

This gives us a diagnostic question that links to what I originally wanted to talk about:

Do you currently have a real relationship with God as God really is, or are you playing a game and sometimes upset about the rules? Is the focus God or God's rules?

I could phrase that as, God God-self or God's words?

Is God your source of information you can work with or the One you fall on in faith?

Is the Bible your book of truth or does it point to the One who is the Truth?

Text B: Isaiah 55.1-9

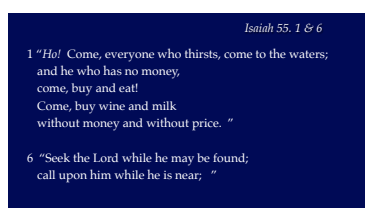
The rules for Jews living by the covenant made with Moses were simple – not that complicated or difficult really. Honour the LORD your God and you will be blessed.

The land will know peace and prosperity and you will flourish. On the flip side if you disregard the Lord and dishonor him you will invoke the curses of the covenant upon yourselves and the land.



Thus, if you disregard the Lord and his instructions you will know his wrath of absence and worse.

These were the covenant provisions underlying the questions Jesus was asked and behind the passage we heard from Isaiah today. Speaking to the Jewish people living in the pain of exile in Babylon, dislocated and away from their land as the manifest blessing of the Lord, Isaiah takes on the voice of a street vender -a water seller- who raises his voice the way we might hear in the weekly markets from fruit seller and others:



¹ “*Ho!* Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ”

Then later:

⁶ “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he

is near; ”

Jesus spoke to people in pain after tragedy and calamity. Isaiah spoke to people who felt abandoned by God and consigned to endless exile without hope of return.

Isaiah addresses the people as thirsty and hungry. He says there is abundance freely available to drink as water, wine and milk. He addresses the spiritual thirst in their felt pain.

Isaiah is bringing a wider message of hope but here he is talking about personal relationship:

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.”

He is calling the people to now chase after God and come close to him - as said elsewhere to ‘seek his face.’

As a prophet like Jesus to come, Isaiah was saying that at this time, God is willing to be found. You have experienced enough of his absence and drunk of the curse of exile to the point where now, now God will allow you to find him. Start seeking for the LORD and calling on Him.

A popular book from 20 years ago described this as ‘God chasing’.²

Isaiah says now is the time to get so close to the Lord that you can see His face. The imagery here is of a royal court with the king on a throne.

In seeking the favour of a king you can send a message from afar. You can employ a go-between to cover the distance between where you are prepared to go to and the king on his throne. There is safety and convenience in that.

On the other hand you can do what it takes to get so close that you can see the face of King and see for yourself how he looks upon you and your prayer. This takes effort, faith and courage. Being close enough to see the king’s face means one can see and be seen.

This practice reflected in Proverbs 29:26

Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the LORD that a person gets justice.

The best reference I know for this is 2 Chronicles 7:14.

2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and **pray and seek my face** and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.³

What is on offer here is a face-to-face relationship with the LORD that serves to richly meet the spiritual thirst - sounds like what Jesus would later talk about!

This is beyond being transactional and daring to be upfront and personal with all that involves.

After saying this Isaiah goes on to address two obstacles to seeking of God’s face: un-repentance and wrong thinking:

² The God Chasers by Tommy Teeny

³ Some may remember that Ronald Reagan read this at his Presidential Inauguration in 1981

7 let the wicked forsake *their* way, and the unrighteous *their* thoughts; let *them* return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on *them*, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

The first step in seeking God is to stop rebelling. Rebellion cuts us off from God and separates us. This is the easier part of repentance. Just stop doing silly destructive things.

Then comes the harder aspect of repentance or *metanoia* as it's later described in New Testament Greek

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

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

This is not easy. We expect God to be sensible, reasonable and possibly '*normaal*'. So when we seek intimacy with the LORD it's hard work to adjust to Him when our minds may be so different.

Take the words of Jesus to those reporting the calamities. For the average good-hearted soul that takes some adjusting to:

“My ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

God wants to be found and catch us is like a loving parent who plays peek-a-boo or hide and seek hoping the child will find them. Repentance in both modes of turning away from sin and letting go of our precious mind idols represents what impresses him and leads to face-to-face encounters.

Without repentance and change of mind no one gets close to the face of the king and security blocks access. This is strong Old Testament Theology. Consider Psalm 24:

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

⁴ *They* who have clean hands and a pure heart, who do not lift up *their* soul to what is false and do not swear deceitfully.

⁵ *They* will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of *their* salvation.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Psalm 24. 3-6

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Conclusion

My final point is that pain helps make this happen.

Pain brings us to sobriety and makes the genuinely thirsty to seek the face of God with repentance of sin and transformation as part of the process.

This is what Isaiah and Jesus called people to even when pain was real and fresh.

