

how will you live your one, precious life?

a sermon preached on the
second sunday in lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17 – 4:1; Luke 13:1-9

On Friday afternoon, a 28-year-old Australian man attacked the Al Noor Mosque in the centre of Christchurch, and the Linwood Mosque, about 5 kilometres away.

New Zealand's police commissioner said at a Friday evening news conference that 41 people had been killed at Al Noor Mosque, 7 at Linwood Mosque, and another had died at Christchurch Hospital. In total, 48 people, including young children, were treated for injuries at the hospital. 2 of the victims remain in a critical condition.

The Australian man who did these terrible things is a white, nationalist, extremist who posted a racist manifesto online and streamed live video of the attacks on Facebook. The attacks were carefully planned.

It is a sickening, horrifying story of the worst of which humanity is capable. The ripples of terrible actions like this spread far and wide, across distance and across time. Many will continue to be affected for the rest of their lives. Our prayers are with those who have lost loved ones and with all who are touched by this tragedy.

New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, had this to say;

“We, NZ, we were not a target because we are a safe-harbour for those who hate. We were not chosen for this act of violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism. We were chosen for the very fact that we are none of these things. Because we represent diversity, kindness, compassion, a home for those who share our values, refuge for those who need it. And those values, I can assure you, will not and cannot be shaken by this attack.”

Do you think that because these people are suffering in this way, they are worse sinners than us? Of course not. Neither does Jesus. In today's reading from Luke's Gospel Jesus is asked about the Galileans who Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. As with the people in Christchurch, these Galileans were meeting together as a community, worshipping and praying when they were murdered.

Jesus' questioners want to know, did they deserve it?

Behind that kind of question lies the fear that, if there is no reason for suffering, then terrible things could happen to anyone; to me, or those I love. Events like those in Christchurch shake the image we have of our world. If this can happen in New Zealand, is anyone safe? It seems that a human response to tragedy is to want to find a way of being distanced from it, an assurance of protection and immunity. If the people who were affected are not like us, then this kind of thing can't happen to us.

But this kind of fear is dangerous. It allows other human beings to be seen as less valuable, less worthy of life. It allows the telling of terrible lies in order to bolster a feeling of safety. Terrible lies that can lead to further events like the one on Friday.

In the US, the Anti-Defamation League, a respected monitor of extremism, annually publishes a body count of extremist murders. In 2018, there were 50 murders. Who committed these crimes? Every single one was carried out by right wing extremists, white supremacists and extreme nationalists. Not one was carried out by an Islamic extremist. And yet, it is the fear, the lie, that the US is being taken over by Muslims that directly fuelled the fear and hatred that led to these crimes. Humanity cannot afford to continue to ask, do you think that because these people are suffering in this way, they are worse sinners than us?

Jesus will have nothing to do with this. He makes it completely clear that victims of tragedy have done nothing to deserve it. Further than that, he does not get side-tracked in attempting to answer the abstract question of why such things happen. Instead, he shifts the focus onto the practical implications for living in a world where such things do happen.

‘What about you?’, he asks. ‘Given that life is uncertain, and tomorrow is promised to no-one, how will you live your one, precious life?’

We are so fortunate here in Camberwell. We have food, shelter, health care, clothing, far above what we need to sustain life. Mostly, it is easy to be fairly complacent. Day to day, month to month, year to year, life unfolds pretty much as expected. It is easy to unconsciously conclude that a life of middle-class morality entitles its liver to good fortune. The people who are struck by tragedy are not like us, perhaps have made poor choices in life and so, to a greater or lesser extent, deserve whatever happens to them.

But even here in Camberwell, we know in our hearts this is not true. We all know the pain and shock of personal tragedy; the sudden diagnosis, the pain of betrayal, the loss of someone we love, the end of something precious, the witnessing of an attack like that in Christchurch. Undeserved and terrifying, the fragility of human life catches us unaware and breaks our hearts.

Jesus tells his listeners that these tragedies are not judgements, but opportunities to reframe life; to be re-oriented to what is essential. God’s transforming grace is freely available to all, but it cannot do us any good unless we accept it; the choice is to repent or die.

How will you live your one, precious life?

One of the petitions of the *Great Litany*, often used in Lent, asks, “From dying suddenly and unprepared, Good Lord, deliver us”. Teach us to repent, to be transformed. Help us to learn to be so anchored in you Lord that we can find the spiritual, emotional and physical strength needed to live in and through tragedy.

Jesus’ parable about the fig tree speaks more about the judgment and repentance found in the first half of this reading. The unproductive fig tree is going to be given some more time to do what it is supposed to do. It is not being ignored, the gardener is doing everything possible to help it, but unless it responds and bears fruit, it will be cut down.

This reinforces Jesus’ message about the urgency of repentance. Just as the tragedies that befall others are not a sign that they are being punished for sin, neither is my own personal good fortune a sign that I am being rewarded for virtue. It may be that the axe is lying at my roots. Until the time of judgement comes for me, the patience, mercy and grace of God still offer me time to bear fruit.

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Earlier in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist tells the people to, "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8). Repentance is a multi-faceted word. It is less about expressing sorrow and regret, and more about having a change of heart and mind. Less about being morally upright, and more about living whole-heartedly, along with an awareness of human brokenness and a greater desire to be renewed. Like the prodigal son in Luke 15, repentance can be less about finding ourselves, and more about confessing our need to be found and welcomed home.

Today's passage reminds us that there is an urgency to the call to repentance. Sometimes tragedy gives us an opportunity for a new beginning as it prompts us to take stock, to repent and live anew. Sometimes tragedy ends all opportunities. We do not know which day will be our last, so we need to live with an ever-present awareness of the grace that gives us time to repent and bear the fruit of repentance. Whatever that means for each of us, the fruit of our lives will be shaped by the fruit of the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

As we reflect on the parable of the unproductive fig tree, here are some questions that might help us to the new vision of repentance;

- who or what provides me with spiritual manure?
- how do I respond when the soil that anchors me is loosened a bit?
- am I more interested in producing fruit or in putting on leaves and growth?
- how do I use the manure, the resources, around me to make myself fruitful?
- are there branches of my life that are unproductive?
- what practical steps can I take to cut back unfruitful areas of my life?

I'm sure you can think of many other Lenten questions to ponder as you consider this parable.

Judgment and repentance are themes that many people would rather ignore and avoid. But Jesus reminds us that how we choose to live our lives matters because we will not live forever. Events like those in Christchurch sharply remind us of this. Try as we might, there is little we can actually do to control life. It is a precious, fragile gift given by a God of generosity and grace, who calls us to rejoice in the beauty of our fleeting lives, and to bear fruit while we may.

The parable of the fig tree ends without resolution. How will this second chance play out? Thanks to the gardener, the tree is living in grace and it has the opportunity to become productive. Will the tree put on more leafy growth but still not give of itself? Or will it stretch out new roots into the loosened soil, soak up the nutrients around it and bear fruit?

How will you live your one, precious life? Amen.