Week 3

Prepare yourself by reading Luke 13.1-9

Reflections on the Gospel reading

People in the time of Jesus were not so different to people today in terms of the questions that puzzled them. Then, as today, many people were concerned with cause and effect. “Why did that bad thing happen to that person?” When people suffered disease or an accident it was not uncommon for people to see it as a punishment for some sin or offence they’d committed. The followers of Jesus were raised in a culture where this way of thinking was strongly embedded.

This way of seeing suffering as punishment was so prevalent that even if no wrong deed could be attributed to a suffering individual it was often concluded that they were being punished for someone else’s sin. The old story of Achan in the Old Testament is evidence of this view that people were guilty by association – Joshua 7.24.

Seeing suffering as punishment wasn’t just a Jewish way of thinking but seemed to be a common form of logic in the ancient world. In Acts we see it in the story of Paul’s shipwreck on Malta. After he had taken control of the situation on the sinking ship and managed to get everyone safely ashore, a fire was built on the beach to warm them up and dry them out. A snake dashed out of the pile of blazing wood and latched on to Paul. “When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.' Acts 28.4. Paul proved them wrong by not showing any ill effect or dying. It didn’t really alter their way of thinking though and they then decided that he must be a God!

This basic assumption that suffering resulted from sin, was examined in a new way by the book of Job. Job’s friends thought this way and assumed that Job’s great suffering must be punishment for something he had done to offend God. Suffering equalled punishment. By the same logic, prosperity equalled blessing. Both were consequences of one’s actions. The writer of Job questions this simple flawed logic away by showing that there are others ways of accounting for suffering. In this case Job’s suffering was not because of anything he had done, but because of God’s decision to test his faithfulness. Perhaps in a perverse way his suffering was the result of something he did. He was such a good holy man that his righteous life attracted the attention of Satan who asked God’s permission to test him.

It is recorded in John’s Gospel that this question was raised when Jesus encountered and healed a man who was born blind. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” – John 9.2. Jesus affirmed that the man’s blindness had nothing to do with anyone’s sin. It was however an opportunity for God to display his grace and power in healing the man.

Here in Luke’s Gospel the issue is raised again by Jesus. Even though it does not say so in the text, someone must have suggested that the Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate’s soldiers had been punished for some sin they committed. This is the only mention of the incident of Pilate and the Galilean sacrifice-offerers and so we know nothing of the background of the story. Jesus however jumped in and stifled any thought that these were greater sinners than anyone else. They were not being punished by God for some sin they had committed but because they or some other Galileans had gotten under the skin of Pontius Pilate and tested his patience to breaking point. A lot of the paramilitary opposition to the Roman occupation came from Galilee. It seems that it was easy to test Pilate’s patience and he was known to react quickly and harshly.

Jesus used several examples from everyday life to get people to think differently about sin and suffering. Besides the story of the man born blind and the story of the slaughtered Galileans, Jesus spoke of a group of unfortunate construction workers or bystanders who were killed by a falling tower. Life is precarious and ‘bad’ things happen to good and bad alike.

This is what it’s like living in a world that we can’t control and with people who make all manner of bad choices. Some suffering is the result of deliberate action, some by accident, natural processes and illness. These things are not judgements of God but when people die from any cause, they must all stand before God for a loving assessment of their lives.

Jesus too had to die and the issue of why would dominate much of the thought and discussion of the first generations of disciples. As was the case with the man born blind, the death of Jesus was God’s opportunity to demonstrate the extent of God’s love and his judgement in favour of God’s people and creation.

And what about the second part of the Gospel reading, the story of the no-producing fig tree? Unlike the fig tree that Jesus lost patience with and cursed – Mark 11 and Matthew 21 - the fate of this fig tree is more positive. The parable is about God’s patience with people. Throughout the history of Israel, the constant recurring theme is of the failure and unfaithfulness of God’s people and God’s healing patience. While ever people are breathing there is time for repentance and a new start for them to bear fruit. Things were coming to a head however for Israel and for all rebellious individuals. God’s patience, like the owner of the fig tree, has its limits and this is the last chance for people as Jesus heads for Jerusalem.

Think about - following God in the tough here and now

There are always dangers to be faced when someone takes up their cross and follows Jesus. Taking up your cross is another way of saying “I’m realistic about this lifestyle and am prepared to face whatever comes my way”. This is not dissimilar to the marriage commitment where the promise is to stay together “for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . as long as we both shall live”. Hard times are easier to face when faced with someone who loves you and faces them with you. In baptism we are given a new family who are also following Jesus in their everyday life and who support one another in this following.

Australian everyday contexts are not as demanding as those faced by followers in others countries. Our range of challenges includes people who may regard our commitment as odd, who think we are goody-goodies, hyprocrites or just plain boring. Rarely will we encounter anyone who thinks we are dangerous or subversive or challenging.

Here are two cameos of faithful Australian cross-carrying followers who faced danger and opposition as they followed Jesus in their time and place. Interestingly much of their opposition came from within the church! They remained committed in their ministry context and did not look to ‘safer’ places to follow.

Rev John Brown Gribble

John Brown Gribble was an Australian Angican priest in the mid to late 1800’s who was committed to his local context in the Riverina area of NSW, in the Kimberley area of Western Australia and in far northern Queensland. In all of these places he served the local Aboriginal people, sharing the news of new life in Christ, protecting them from people who exploited them and advocating for their rights. Gribble was a bit of a firebrand, full of righteous anger and was in his day, a similar figure to Elijah in the Old Testament or John the Baptist in the Gospels. He faced up to Ned Kelly in Jerilderee demanding that he return stolen property and stop intimidating the people of the town. He established the Warrengesda mission in Darlington Point, a place of safety and hope. He negotiated it’s transfer to the NSW government, then headed to the north west of Western Australia where he championed the rights of local Aboriginal people who were being shamefully mistreated by local landowners. For his trouble he was run out of the state by wealthy squatters and government officials and severely beaten up by hired thugs. Gribble continued his committed ministry of Gospel justice for Aboriginal people in far western NSW, and ended his ministry in north Queensland where he established the Yarrabah mission.

Rev Lancelot Threlkeld

Threlkeld was a generation earlier than Gribble but there are similarities in their personalities and ministries. Threlkeld came to Australia and exercised his ministries mostly in Lake Macquarie near Newcastle and later in Sydney. His mission society was given a large grant of land on the western side of Lake Macquarie and he established a mission to Aboriginal people there, teaching agriculture, learning and recording the local language and sharing the Gospel. He was among the very first to translate scripture into a local Aboriginal language. Threlkeld’s strong defence of Aboriginal culture and demand for just treatment of people brought him into conflict with colonial leaders and he was eventually dismissed. He then acquired land at what is now Coal Point and built the first coal mine in Lake Macquarie in order to support himself and his ministry. All the while he used his money and time serving the local Aboriginal people and acting as interpreter for them when they had to deal with courts and government officials.

Gribble and Threlkeld, who made long-term commitments to their time and place, challenge us as we think about the man who wanted to cut down the fig tree that wasn’t bearing fruit. Many in the church thought that their ministries to the Aboriginal people were a failure because few formally responded in baptism and church participation. After many years they too doubted whether he had achieved much for the kingdom because they also measured Gospel success by ‘bottoms on pews’. Their courage and commitment to local context, their belief in the worth of all people and their demands for justice echo what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3.6 and following. We are not to measure our success in ministry but rather to plant and water seeds, lay foundations, and prayerfully leave it to God to give the growth.