

'Limited-Time Offer' Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 7th March 2010

The words from Isaiah that I've just read have long been among my favorites. One reason is that some of the verses were a Scripture passage I had to learn by heart as a teenager. It was a slightly older version of the Bible that I learned, the Revised Standard Version, but essentially, they were the same as the New Revised Standard Version we use in this church. The passage went: 'Seek ye the LORD whilst he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.' I loved these words, especially those that said God will 'abundantly pardon'. There is nothing grudging about God's forgiveness. He is just dying to forgive us, as Christians believe, literally dying in Christ.

Another reason I love these words is the sense of urgency they convey in: 'Seek ye the LORD whilst he may be found' and then in the parallel line: 'Call ye upon him while he is near.' The prophet is urging people to do something and to do it now, right away. He wants his listeners to turn from all that stops their life from being the best it can be.

Our Old Testament passage this morning offers us such a helpful way of understanding why we need to repent, that is, turn right around from our own selfish ways of living and turn facing God, living in the light of his love. And notice this: it is God's loving desire for us that should prompt us to repent and not the threat of punishment. If a child of ours, of whatever age, or maybe even a friend of ours is off track, then our appeals for change do not rest on our wanting him or her to come to a sticky end but rather for life to be better for them, starting now. So our God is not a threatening God but an encouraging God. It is this grasp of God's abundant mercy that Isaiah presents so beautifully in these words. He presents God as making a limited time offer: 'Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.' It is not that he will disappear or withdraw from us, but that we may put ourselves beyond his presence, by our repeated and uncaring reluctance to seek his will in prayer and in action.

God's gift of mercy is not without its price, as Jesus indicates in his frequent emphasis on repentance. It is surely an insult to God to think that it doesn't matter how we act. It's neither here nor there if we disobey him. 'God will forgive. It's his job.' This was the quip of the German poet, Heinrich Heine. 'God will forgive. It's his job.'

If it's all the same whether we respond to Jesus and repent, that is, turn from our will to God's, then Jesus' mission, especially his crucifixion, is pointless. How do you feel when you catch yourself making the same mistake you've made before, being judgmental or impatient or sarcastic or ... Whatever is your besetting sin? Isn't it discouraging? Our religion assures us that God is just falling over himself to forgive us, but it is you and I that have to be truly sorry and try to change.

Lent is a whole season of repentance. We don't just repent on Ash Wednesday and then hope this carries us through for the next forty days. If you're like me, you've already

done something you resolved not to do or not done something you resolved to do as Lent began. And we're not even half way through yet. No, repentance cannot be a one-off. It needs to be recurrent, regular, persistent, daily. Remember all those things we said we'd renounce in our Ash Wednesday service and all the things we said we would cultivate? Perhaps you weren't present in this church on Ash Wednesday (though there was a good turn-out). That's no excuse: at someone's request, these things were listed in this month's newsletter (eg nurture compassion towards others rather than passing judgment on them ...)

I like the rabbinic saying: 'Repent one day before your death.' It has a humor about it. Think about it. When is one day before your death? Is it March 7th 2010? Is it March 27th 2010? Perhaps, it's a long way off. Perhaps your death will be March 7th 2020? Who knows? And that, says the rabbi, is the point of his saying to each of us: 'Repent one day before your death.' In other words, repent each day of your life. Repent today. After all, when else can you repent if not now. If I say, I will repent, nothing has actually happened. Another rabbinic saying emphasizes the importance of living in the present, of not keep putting off something we need to do: 'If not now, when?'

Did you notice how in this morning's gospel reading Jesus is warns about our tendency to think that other people are being punished? He speaks of those Galileans killed by Pilate and those killed in Jerusalem by a falling tower. He asks those present whether they are concluding that these victims of disaster must have been particularly wicked. It is interesting that Jesus feels it necessary to ask this question. He surely knows that human nature is prone to drawing these conclusions about God's supposed punishment on others. He immediately goes on to say that the people who died in this way weren't anymore culpable than those listening to him now. He addresses his hearers: '...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Aren't we just the same in our day? Self-righteous anger is a dish we love to linger over and return to, time and time again. Self-righteous anger is a dish that goes down smoothly. It makes us feel superior. It elevates us above lesser mortals, not to mention our enemies. Everything becomes bracingly black and white, with no shades of gray. We are the good guys and those others are the bad guys. Self-righteous anger also reheats wonderfully; it tastes almost as good each time we take it out of the oven. Everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Christians blame Muslims and Muslims blame Christians. Fundamentalists blame Liberals and Liberals blame fundamentalists. Amid the din, Jesus says: 'Hold on. Think about a homely old fig tree that has not borne much fruit for a long time. The farm owner says: 'Cut that wretched tree down.' His head gardener says: 'First, let me throw some manure on the poor thing. Give the tree one more year, and if it does not produce, chop it down.'

'So just when we begin to stir up flattering, heroic images of ourselves in full battle dress, ready to wipe evil off the face of the earth, Jesus knocks us off our moral high horses. He brings us down to earth and back to ourselves, with talk of fertilizer and a scruffy tree.

Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space. It is enough to ruin your appetite for self-righteous anger. It is Lent though, and Lent does mess with the menu.’¹

When it comes to other people, we don’t like Jesus challenging the view that suffering is a punishment for sin. We prefer to think that people should get their just deserts, especially when we know we’re the good people. But then something happens that clearly challenges this view. We, or good people we know or care about, suffer some terrible calamity. Then we have to listen to Jesus because the old platitudes won’t do.

Surely, if God were in the business of meting out judgement and curses in relation to our sins, there probably would not be anyone left on the planet. Jesus says no to simplistic answers to deep and complex questions, no to attempts to solve deep troubles with quick fixes, and no to shallow theological thinking. When Jesus hears of the death of these Galileans, he is responding to a human ache. Much is unknown. But Jesus does not let this become an excuse for doing nothing. Rather, he seizes the opportunity to urge his listeners to take a step in the right direction. Leave the rest to God, but at least take a step. The working out of God’s kingdom on earth is not ours to figure out in its entirety, but each of us can, even amidst the deep mystery of life, live faithfully. God’s mercy is a limited time offer not because God runs out of time but because we do. God’s time is eternal; indeed it is no time at all in our human understanding. But our time is limited. One day at a time, we say, when things are tough. When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he urged us ask for daily bread. Again there is a limited time offer. We can’t really stock up on God’s forgiveness by repenting especially hard for a week and then returning to our old ways. We can only truly live in the here and now, seeking the LORD while he may be found.

The lesson that Jesus draws from the untimely deaths of the Galileans and the people crushed by the tower at Siloam is that no one should put off repentance. Jesus is calling people to respond positively to his message before it is too late. It is a limited time offer. As we have thought, it is the same with our deepest desire for someone we love. When a parent asks a child to behave differently, when does he or she want that change to occur? Tomorrow, next week, next month, next year? No. Surely the hope is that the change will occur at the first available opportunity. The regret has to be immediate.

The love may go on indefinitely, but the mercy cannot. Endless chances mean nothing. A child quickly learns that if a threat is not carried out, if there are no consequences for bad behaviour, then there is no reason to stop behaving badly. When we cease bailing someone out, it is not because our love has stopped but because we know that our repeated indulgence is not helping the other person truly change. And, of course, only the person himself or herself can execute that change. No one can change for someone else, not even a little bit. Our Scriptures this morning warn us about making glib statements about God punishing others. They show us the theological tension between the assurance of God’s kindness and the call to immediate repentance. The door is open for each of us now. It is a rare opportunity, a limited time offer. So as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, let us accept the invitation to God’s gracious banquet today.

¹ Rodney Clapp in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C volume 2 (2010), Westminster John Knox Press p 96