

Dorset South and West Circuit Written Service for Sunday, March 20
prepared by Tony Boyden, Local Preacher

THEME: THE JOY OF REPENTANCE

With his own suffering lying ahead of him in Jerusalem, Jesus reflects on two recent disasters in the area. They are not a punishment from God. Those who suffer are no more sinful than anyone else – but all of us need to repent, and to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

CALL TO WORSHIP: Our God is a merciful God. Even when our thoughts and actions take us away he forgives us when we turn back to him. His ways are higher! His ways are greater! So let us focus our eyes and hearts on the Lord of all life in our worship today.
Amen

HYMN: **StF 435 We come to you with no pretence** *Andrew Pratt (b 1948)*

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| 1. We come to you with no pretence,
yet nourished by your grace.
We come as people needing love within
this time and place. | 3. We need your spirit to be strong,
your risking, leaping faith,
that brings the love of God to bear in every
aching space |
| 2. We come confessing all we are,
yet all we have to give.
We ask for your renewing power
to teach us how to live. | 4. Then from this point, restored, renewed,
we pledge to take your way;
to live responding to your call
with each succeeding day. |

PRAYER OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

Thank you, loving God, for your patience and compassion.
When we are like the fig tree – nurture us.
When we are like the owner of the vineyard – hold us back.
When we are the gardener – empower us.
At all times grant us the patience and wisdom of love, lest we destroy that which you would
bless and uproot that which you would see blossom.
We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Jesus challenged people to repent and turn again to you. That challenge, O God, is still
relevant for us and for all people.
So we stand before you to confess again our need of your forgiveness and your renewing
power in our lives.

Lord God, forgive us when we are slow to change, but quick to judge;
when we take more from life than we give back;
when we give up on others too soon and offer support too late;
when we deny others the opportunity to grow, and uproot their dreams.
Forgive us and grant us your patience, perseverance and vision, and inspire us to care for all
you have made.
We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

To all who truly repent, God says: 'Your sins are forgiven, I will remember them no more.'
Amen

READING (NRSV)

Luke 13 verses 1-9: Repent or Perish

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

REFLECTION

"You're not a Christian are you?" Frequently the question is expressed in a way that merits an exclamation mark rather than a question mark.

'Christian' frequently conjures up in peoples' eyes a group of joyless do-gooders with a black and white vision of humankind: the 'ins' and the 'outs', the saved and the un-saved. Or possibly our critics might have a picture of a smug self-satisfied exclusive Sunday club quick to condemn non-members but reluctant to reach out in active discipleship. Possibly some critics might grudgingly concede that "Jesus was a good bloke" but they won't subscribe to "a load of superstitious mumbo-jumbo"

We know that to stereotype all Christians thus is unfair although I'm sure some of our brothers and sisters in faith might well come close to the descriptions. Thankfully most churches now prefer to focus on the God who steadfastly loves us and forgives us whenever we are genuinely sorry for our transgressions. Hopefully, too, churches help people to come to a sense of self-worth as part of God's beloved creation and to develop the confidence to use the skills and talents he has given us in his service.

Recent years have seen a plethora of programmes and texts under the title 'self help'. Many are worthwhile. In fact, for some years I worked with both adults and children on such courses. They can be of great value in helping people to live more positive lives but many have a particular drawback. They emphasise that we are accountable only to ourselves on earth for our actions; and that, to my mind, runs counter to a Christian commitment to reach out to others in love and service. For the same reason the terms 'sin' and 'repentance' figure little in such programmes and it has to be said that some modern church leaders shy away from them too.

But how can we be selective about what lies at the core of the message in both the Old and New Testaments, not least in the Gospels? True, 'sin' and 'repentance' might have been emphasised in the past as means by which the Church controlled and condemned individuals or even entire groups. But that should not devalue their use now.

In our text this morning Jesus tells us not to think ourselves too special. We might, for instance, be regular church attenders, generous in our offerings and ready to take a firm stand on social issues etc. but that does not allow us to condemn others; to presume and pontificate as if we were God. It is not in our place to say that people behave badly and thus have bad things coming to them. In Jesus's words to condemn those involved in mixing blood in the Temple sacrifices or crushed by the Tower of Siloam would be to apply human judgments. He emphasises that suffering has nothing to do with how sinful a person might be; and that should be a caution to those Christians today who blame natural disasters like tsunamis on the 'wrong-doings' of the local population. God's judgment doesn't work that way. St Paul made the same point when writing to the haughty and divided members of the church at Corinth.

None of us is perfect but once we drop any pretensions to moral superiority we can look to the fulfilling joy of repentance. Repentance is not about falling into a pit of guilt and shame or about self-flagellation. It's about re-orienting ourselves. It's about turning round to face God and to express genuine sorrow for what we've done. It's about undertaking to be more worthy and proactive followers of Christ. It's about coming in from a cold wasteland into the warm and sunny presence of God.

St Paul stressed that that while we will be tested it will never be beyond what we can endure and God will always be on hand and ready to help us. Jesus used the parable of the fig tree to show that God never gives up on us. The tree bears no fruit and hasn't done for years. By rights it should be dug up and burned. But no, the owner gives it another year to bear fruit, tended by the gardener. Always another year. Never too late. God really gives us every chance to turn back to him. He doesn't want us mired in guilt or miserable. He actually wants us to be free of the burden which separates us from him.

The terms 'sin' and 'repentance' should not embarrass us. We should not presume to pass judgment on others but rather to admit our own faults. Then we have the joy of turning back to God. Repentance is not an assault course. It's not a driving test. No one's standing there with a checklist to ensure we get every word and action right in some complicated ritual. It's a priceless gift given to us free because of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. It's an act of grace almost beyond our comprehending. And to get it all we have to do is turn back to God and hold out our hands. Amen.

HYMN: StF 439 Abba Father, let me be. *Dave Bilborough (b 1960)*

Abba Father, let me be	Never let my heart grow
yours and yours alone.	cold, never let me go,
May my will forever be	Abba Father, let me be
ever more your own.	yours and yours alone

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Loving Lord, in the days when you walked as a man upon earth life was hard and people suffered. Your land was occupied, peace was just a dream. You knew about trouble.

So, Lord, we bring our troubled world to you now. You are the Lord of all, the gardener of creation. Teach the world's leaders how they best may tend the trees of healing and righteousness.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven, **restore your creation to wholeness.**

We have made our world a garden of damaged trees and bitter fruit. Lord, we pray for those places where there is hurt, anger and war, for lands where children have never known peace, for peoples brutalised by suffering. We particularly think of the people of Ukraine at this time

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven, **restore your creation to wholeness.**

Lord, we pray for all those who suffer pain and persecution, especially those who suffer at the hands of others. We pray too for those who have grown so far away from knowing you that they cause hurt, or carry out persecution.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven, **restore your creation to wholeness.**

We pray for those who are dying or recently bereaved: may they know you are with them on their journey. Comfort all those who are frightened or lonely: may their sadness give way to joy as they feel the warmth of your love.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven, **restore your creation to wholeness.**

God of all things, we pray for the ravaged earth. Forgive us and show us how to be better gardeners, better stewards, better custodians of the world around us. **Amen.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your Name.
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

HYMN: StF 416 There's a wideness in God's mercy *Frederick William Faber (1814-63)*

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| 1. There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice;
which is more than liberty. | 4. For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind. |
| 2. There is plentiful redemption in
the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members in
the sorrows of the Head | 5. But we make our love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own. |
| 3. There is grace enough for
thousands of new worlds as great
as this:
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss | 6. If our love were but more simple
we should take him as his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the presence of our Lord. |

BLESSING

May you go joyfully into the world with the peace of God in your heart and strengthened by his love so that you bring comfort and healing to those in need. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**