

**Hinde Street Methodist Church**  
Sunday 24th March 2019 11am  
Rev Peter Cornick

**‘Life is inherently tragic’:  
judgement with time to amend our lives by repentance.**

‘Life is inherently tragic, and that is the truth that only faith, but not our seeming logic, can accept.’

So wrote Richard Rohr in his book, *Falling Upward*.<sup>1</sup> What does he mean?

Rohr, makes the case for the world being ‘inherently tragic’. The universe is more a product of, as he says: ‘ever-increasing diversity, multiplicity, dark holes, dark matter, death and rebirth, loss and renewal in different forms, and yes, even violence’. The western mind, and not least, the Christian church, has sought to impose order and logic onto a world which is inherently chaotic and disordered. By contrast, the faith of the Judaeo-Christian tradition at the time of Jesus, he writes, would understand this tragedy and chaos – (although not the dark matter). Tragedy and chaos was their world.

Faith seeks to comprehend this tragedy – or at least, speaks honestly to it. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition of Jesus’ day, the tragic nature of existence, and the salvation one hopes for, are mixed in together. Tragedy and salvation are the warp and weft of the cloth.

Perhaps the best example of this mix, is the cross and the resurrection. One cannot exist without the other. Indeed, the cross, which seems at first to be tragic, is at the same time, salvation. Resurrection, which is hailed as glorious, bears the marks of crucifixion. The tragic and the salvation, are mixed in together. They both speak to each other. Through faith.

And faith, Richard Rohr says, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, sees ‘the problem inside the solution and [the problem] as part of the solution.’

So, if life is inherently tragic, attempting to apply logic is not going to deal with the tragedy. The only truth that can accept the tragedy, is faith.

The Gospel reading today, presents us with exactly this mixture of tragedy and salvation.

It presents us with exactly what Rohr speaks about: the problem being inside the solution; and the problem being a part of the solution.

The passage is going to present us with two tragedies: one entirely human made – and grotesque, the other, a random disaster – albeit, probably a result of human error. Outside of Luke, there is no other record of these incidents.

The first tragedy: Pilate – of whom we will hear more on Good Friday – has apparently massacred Galilean Jews on their way to the Temple. For what reason, we have no idea. It is an act of violent state terror.

The second tragedy: a tower has fallen on eighteen people. All dead.

If this is a people who are used to chaos and disorder, the very fact that the two incidents are mentioned, tells us that this people still have the human capacity to be shocked and distressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, London, 2012

.... A tragedy made by human malice; and a random accident, although we would undoubtedly ask, where were the building regulations?

We don't need to look hard to find modern parallels.

The world is still reeling following the massacre in Christchurch last week. Appallingly, on Thursday, windows of five mosques were smashed in Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> This is the same week that some prominent women MPs, were advised not to return to their home for their own safety – purely because of their political views on Brexit. The brutal treatment of those considered 'the other', and the desire for control that we find in Pilate, is not confined to the first century.

Meanwhile, in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, in the wake of Cyclone Idai, people have lost homes and farms – and family. An estimated 2.6 million people have been affected.<sup>3</sup> A natural disaster of catastrophic proportions. Although one has to ask, with global warming having raised sea levels, is what we are seeing a result of the burning of fossil fuels on which we have built our comfort?

And so, Jesus presents to us the tragedy of human existence. It is raw – brutal – painful. But within the problem, that he presents to us, is to be found the solution. And the problem is part of the solution.

The solution Jesus calls us to, is to repent.

At first glance, the two tragedies mentioned by Jesus, seem to be a convenient way of dealing with a theological question, which someone, has presumably posed. The question is a version of the traditional question, why do bad things happen to good people? Why does Pilate massacre the Galileans, or why does a tower fall on eighteen innocent people. Why do the people affected by Cyclone Idai and the Muslim people of Christchurch suffer? If God is good, why doesn't he, or she, stop this happening?

You want a logical answer? So do I. But remember, the world is inherently tragic, and that is a truth, only faith can accept. Logic, will not help.

The version of the question Jesus responds to though, is not, why doesn't God do something about this. It is about the relation of suffering and sin.

The opinion of the day – and, remarkably, one still hears it today – was, that suffering was related to the sins of a person. Think of the question Jesus' disciples ask him, in John 9:2. This man born blind – who sinned, him or his parents? The answer is neither. And for this massacre and the collapsing tower, Jesus makes it very clear that there is no connection between suffering and the sins of those who suffer; 'do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' Of course not.

Two inherently tragic events; and Jesus teaches us not to link suffering with the sin of those who died. We learn here that God is not vindictive. And yet, in hearing these tragic stories, there is an awful feeling that these innocent victims, are suffering because of the sins or omissions of others. The sins of Pilate are plain to see. And the falling tower?

Down the road from here, Grenfell – where at the very least, human error failed to understand the combustible nature of cladding. Human ignorance is not a sin of course ... but if someone knew and did nothing ... the enquiry will find out.

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<sup>2</sup> BBC

<sup>3</sup> christianaid.org

Jesus follows each story with the invitation to repent. And here is the problem found within the solution. A mixing of the tragic with salvation.

To repent.

We could do nothing to halt the events in Christchurch, but we can do something about the casual prejudice we hear about Muslim people or Jewish people, or the LGBT community, whether it be in our office, at a meal, or in the political party we belong to.

We can't stop a cyclone, but what steps could we take as individuals, as a church, to reduce our carbon footprint? Look at the Living Lent website if you want some ideas – if you are still going vegan for Lent, well done; when I suggested I might buy a new pair of trousers, I was reminded I didn't need to buy anything new in Lent! And of course, I didn't.

And this is the point: repentance is a new way of seeing things. It is re-orientating ourselves with God in view. Repentance tends to feel a rather guilt laden word and a chore – in fact, it is meant to give life and joy. That we might live differently. That others might live.

I read that Jesus talks of repentance in the present tense – repent meaning, do so continually. Don't repent as a one off – repentance is a way of life.

In the two tragic stories Jesus tells, we are sharply confronted with death – with the span of life. Our life. Do we live that life in the continual spirit of repentance? Or just when we feel like it? Jesus in his message is calling us to live Lent continually.

Faith alerts us to the tragedy of the world. And alerts us to our part in it. So, the problem, of sin and self-interest, is discovered in the solution – to repent. Aware of the problem of our shortcomings, we are called to re-orientate our lives towards God – to repent.

But there is another part to repentance, which we mustn't miss.

Every day, groups meet downstairs. Anonymously. People suffering from addictions which have taken over their lives. From alcohol to eating disorders to sex, the addiction has been recognised and the support from each other helps to control the temptations.

Meeting in groups, in fellowships as they call them too, is crucial. Accountability to one another is a kind of policing service. The anonymous visitors cannot do it by themselves.

But they also recognise that to deal with the addiction, they need a higher power. Now this isn't necessarily God – people will attribute the higher power to various forces. The point here is, to repent, to re-orientate life, to be able to live without addiction, requires someone higher than yourself or your friends.

For the Christian, repentance, cannot be achieved, without the grace offered by Christ.

And so, Jesus tells a short parable.

A fig tree is not producing much fruit. The owner of the fig tree decides cutting it down would be the best action. Get rid of the wastefulness. But the gardener says: 'let it alone for one more year'. Behind the Greek here is the meaning, forgive. Forgive the tree for another year. Tend it with manure and see if it bears fruit. See if it repents. If not, then cut it down.

The story needs to be taken as a whole. Judgement is looming. A short technical delay is needed. Why? To repent. And the delay is granted. What we see here, is God's mercy; God's forgiveness. In the face of sin, of a tree that isn't fruitful, isn't Living Lent so to speak, here is the second chance.

In the inherently tragic nature of life, there is judgement – starkly so – the time is really short. Faith however, has a response – however bad the situation. Repent and find new ways to live. This might

just save a life – even yours. If we challenge hatred by even a small amount, or if we play even a minute part in controlling sea levels by our lifestyle – it all adds up. The parable teaches us that God will always offer that short delay – Christ’s grace is always on offer – even next year as well, when we haven’t been so fruitful. But there is that tension between judgement and grace, which keeps us alive to the urgency to repent.

(I wouldn’t push the analogy of technical delays too far into other areas of our lives! Although, we all need to do some repenting.)

Richard Rohr writes: ‘Jesus is never upset with sinners – only people who think they are not sinners.’ He thinks the church tries to get rid of sin, rather than leaving that mix of the tragic and the salvation. ‘I do not think you should get rid of your sin’ he writes, ‘until you have learnt what it has to teach you.’ A form of repenting.

Paul, in Corinthians seems to be putting forward a similar view. Having assessed the sins of the Israelites, and the Corinthians, he notes that they came to bad ends. Learn then, from your past mistakes he says.

Into an inherently tragic world, faith speaks. It doesn’t try to find a quick solution. Indeed, the problem is part of the solution. We will always sin; we will always need that time to repent – a short delay to judgement. Faith suggests that re-orientating ourselves towards God, repentance, enables us to respond to the reality of life; the reality of sin; and learn from it. Time to amend our lives.

And there is– always grace – always mercy.

Rohr concludes: ‘Faith is simply to trust the real, and to trust that God is found within it.’