

Third Sunday of Lent 2016 morning

Isaiah 55: 1 – 9; Luke 13: 1 – 9

[Toss a coin.] Heads or Tails? I notice nobody shouted out “Both!” Well, it has to be one or the other, hasn’t it? You can’t have it both ways. It can’t be both heads and tails. You can’t have both/and . . . unless you’re God. God is a great both/and merchant. And we diminish God if we try to restrict him to the either/or of human logic.

We were wrestling with this at Lent Group on Thursday evening as we read Psalm 30 – “There is forgiveness with you, so that you shall be feared” – why should you fear God if he’s going to forgive you? And we’re wrestling with it again in this morning’s Gospel reading. We’ve got an urgent call to repentance: “Unless you repent you will all perish.” And that applies to everyone, rich and poor alike, whether you’re a provincial hilly-billy living out in the sticks in Galilee, or whether you’re a metropolitan

sophisticate building posh towers up in Jerusalem. We’re all doomed!

And yet, in the same reading, we have *both* an urgent call to repentance *and* an assurance of God’s patient grace. It’s both/and. God is always willing to wait for us, to give us the chance to bear fruit. The man who planted the fig tree wouldn’t cut it down because there was always the possibility that it might bear fruit next year.

Now, if we’re serious about observing a holy Lent and growing closer to God, we’ve got to sit with these paradoxes and resist the temptation to reconcile them. If we try to smooth out God, we just end up by flattening him. But it might be easier to sit with the paradox – the both/and – if we recast the way the call to repentance is expressed.

The problem is that we always tend to think that we’re called to repent *or else* we’ll get beaten with a big stick.

But how about we're called to repent *so that* we can experience God's grace; and in that grace bear fruit? The call to repentance is not a threat: it's a generous invitation. It's an invitation to have everything reconfigured so that there is nothing to stand between us and God; and we are capable of being much more, doing much more, achieving much more than we could ever imagine in the strength of our own resources.

The generosity of God is a theme that runs through both the readings this morning. In the first reading, from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we hear God saying "He who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money, without price." And then the reading goes on to encourage people to return to the Lord – to forsake wickedness and unrighteous thoughts - "for [God] will abundantly pardon." Again, it's the idea of repentance being an invitation to receive abundance, to receive God's generosity, rather than a way of avoiding punishment.

And our response to God's generosity is to be, similarly, generous ourselves. God fills our hearts with generosity, and from the abundance of our hearts we find the capacity to be generous. The instinct to look after ourselves, to put up defensive barriers to preserve our self-interest, is overridden by God's grace.

This operates at different levels: emotionally, financially and politically. It operates emotionally in the way we respond to one another and to those around us with venturesome love. It operates financially in the way we use our material resources to fund God's mission through the church and to support others in need. And the way it operates politically is shown by what the Pope has to say to Donald Trump; and by the theological observation that to be a little-Englander is simply un-Christian.

At the referendum on the 23rd June about Britain's membership of the EU there will be Christians on both

sides of the poll. It's said most bishops are pro-EU. On Question Time on Thursday evening one of my heroes, the Revd Giles Fraser, was speaking in favour of leaving the EU. But he expressly distanced himself from a little-Englander mentality. He made it absolutely clear that, as a matter of Christian principle, Britain should be more generous in the way we respond to those seeking refuge from conflict in places such as Syria. Again, generosity identified as the hallmark of the Christian life.

Of course there's a strong link between the ideas of generosity and hospitality. God's generosity is hospitable, of him freely offering food and drink. One of the ways this church has tried to respond to God's generosity is through the Priory Luncheon Club. And this week the Luncheon Club has celebrated its 30th birthday. For 30 years Priory Church has been serving Christ and the community by offering elderly folk the opportunity to get together, to share each other's company and to have a good, hot meal. That is made

possible by people volunteering – being generous with their time and energy –preparing vegetables, quite literally slaving over a hot stove, week in week out all Wednesday morning, lugging tables about, setting places, waiting on, washing up and so on and so on and so on. Today we give thanks that all that has been going on for 30 years and we pray that the people of the Priory will continue to be generous in the way we serve Christ and the community in the next 30 years. I'm sure it's all been jolly hard work. But I'm also sure that those who have been doing it for donkeys' years – Avril Wood doing it for the entire 30 years – will say that they have enjoyed every minute of it and have been blessed by blessing others. It's been an instance of Christ-like-ness: both/and, win/win – heads or tails.

Amen.