

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; Ps 103 (102); 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12; Luke 13:1-9

If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down

Luke 13:1 At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

4 Or 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Luke 13:6 Then 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. 7 So 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?’ 8 He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading interprets the time of the ministry and of the church as the time of opportunity. There are three moments in this Gospel passage.

1. Pilate’s intervention in the Temple
2. The collapse of the tower at Siloam
3. The parable of the fig tree

The first two belong together; the third is somewhat independent but is a response, at Luke’s hands, to the first two.

This sequence consists partly of material special to Luke and partly of material possibly found in Matthew and Mark, but considerably reworked.

KIND OF WRITING

The conversation about disasters is technically a *chreia*, i.e. an anecdote from the life of Jesus, with a point. The point made is then explored and expanded in the unique parable that follows. The topic common to both is the right use of time, the “now” of salvation. In Luke-Acts, both *metanoia* (conversion, 7-3-10+14 = Mt-Mk-Lk+Acts) and *nun* (now, 4-3-14+25) are typical themes.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Disaster was often taken to be a punishment for sin. This is largely based on Deut 28-30. Texts from Job and Ezekiel can serve as illustrations.

‘Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker? (Job 4:17)

When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. (Ezek 18:26)

(ii) Repentance at the word of a prophet is also found frequently in the Old Testament. For Luke, Jesus, like the prophets of old, is put to death for his proclamation.

Thought for the day

We are all aware of the fleeting nature of time and we all have experience of the missed opportunity, the moment of grace—however secular—overlooked. At the same time, we know that our God is the God of second chances and that it is never truly over.

Like Augustine, we hear the insistent murmur, “if not now, when?” That future moment of grace will be just like this one, ordinary, nothing special, fleeting and yet it is the only moment that exists, the “now” of our everyday.

Prayer

Patient and insistent God, knock again on the door our hearts. We are never really ready—a sign perhaps of our everyday need of you. Help us undertake again to dig around and manure, so that under your grace, we may bear fruit, *fruit that will last*. Amen.

(iii) The fig tree and the vine are signs of God’s blessing in the Old Testament.

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. (Mic 4:3–4)

Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. (Joel 2:22)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) *Two peculiar stories in Mark and Matthew seem somehow to be linked to ours today.*

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, “May

	Readings	Stories	Topic
LENT 3	Exodus 3:1-8,13-15	The burning bush	God’s name
Moses	Ps 102	Compassion and love	Forgiveness
	1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12	The rock was Christ	Warning
	Lk 13:1-9	Parable of the fig tree	Conversion

no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. (Mark 11:12–14; cf. Matthew 21:18-19)

This prophetic gesture is not found in Luke, perhaps because the Temple as such is no longer an issue and, in any case, Luke wishes to underline the continuity between Judaism and Christianity. In its place, it seems, we have the present parable. Note, however, that Luke uses the story differently, not to illustrate judgment but rather as an expression of mercy. God gives us all an “extension.”

(ii) *A similar invitation to repent is found in the letter to the church in Smyrna:*

Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent. (Rev 2:5)

ST PAUL

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Cor 6:1–2)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

There is a slight tension between the two stories and the parable. The stories are warnings of sudden death, whether by human intervention or chance. The parable, however, is a story of mercy: given that life may end, given that the vineyard owner—God—expects fruitfulness, then, *now* is the time. However, an ominous layer is implied: the unfruitful person is (literally!) a waste of space.

Verse 1 This story about Pilate, apparently sending in the troops to people at prayer, reflects (a) the Temple as a flash point of tension and (b) the well-documented violence of Pilate, who was eventually removed by the Romans because it was too much even for them. Very likely Jesus, as a Galilean, is being asked to comment on what happened to fellow Galileans. Jesus turns these two disaster stories into prophetic warnings, being a prophet himself. The challenge

with each event is that time has run out. The mention of Pilate makes a link with the death of Jesus, whose life will be also cut short by him, paradoxically.

Verse 2 A rhetorical question with the implied answer “no, they were not.” Jesus rejects any simplistic link between sin and disaster.

Verse 3 At first glance, we might be able to conclude that if they had repented this would not have happened to them, but that is not the point. Rather life can end suddenly, so use the time now. In Luke, the word to perish or to be lost (19-10-27+2) doesn’t mean simply to die, but to lose eternal life. This refrain will be repeated in the story of the tower of Siloam.

Verses 4-5 Again, we have a rhetorical question, with the same expected answer. The incident was not uncommon but is otherwise unreported. Siloam gets another NT mention in John 9, for the feast of Succoth.

The link between these two incidents and the parable is implied but real: *if this is how things are, what should we do?*

Verse 6 A fig tree in a vineyard (which can sound odd) combines two symbolic plants from the world of the Old Testament. The vineyard is used widely as a symbol of God’s relationship with his people (Lk 20:9-19). The fig comes up again in 21:29, part of an invitation to recognise the times (just as here, really).

Verse 7 In Mark, Jesus looks for the fruit *out of season* whereas here the farmer comes regularly and apparently *in season*. The key difference with Mark is that in Luke the fig really is given time, as well as irrigation and sustenance.

Verse 8 The message is, “give it one more chance.” The means of renewal / fruitfulness are illustrated: digging around and manure.

Verse 9 After this final chance, there will then be an assessment; this judgement, however, is not arbitrary as it depends on how we have responded per-

sonally. The parable remains open-ended. Cf. *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.* (Luke 15:32)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus rejects the idea that personal misfortune is God’s punishment for sin. Yet a serious illness or accident can serve as a wake-up call about how we live our lives. How have such experiences given you a greater appreciation of the value of your life and relationships, and of the time and opportunities at your disposal?

2. “I’ll wait till tomorrow to do that”. Have you ever said that and then found the chance is gone the next day? In the story, we are called to recognise God at work in our lives and respond to Him. NOW is the opportune moment. When have you been glad you did not put off action to the following day?

3. Perhaps there have been times when you saw yourself like the tree in the parable—useless, merely a waste of space. Think of friends who came to you at such a time, people who saw your potential and were prepared to give you another chance, people who also dug the soil around you and gave you the helps you needed to grow. Perhaps in your turn you have been able to do this for others.

PRAYER

God of salvation, we stand before you on holy ground, for your name is glorified and your mercy revealed wherever your mighty deeds are remembered. Since you are holy and forbearing, turn us from every rash and shallow judgement to seek the ways of repentance.

We ask this through Christ, our deliverance and our hope, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, holy and mighty God for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Deuteronomy 26:4-10	Creed	Ps 91 (90)	Roman 10:8-13	Luke 4:1-13
Lent 2	Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18	Covenant	Ps 27 (26)	Philippians 3:17-4:1	Luke 9:28-36
Lent 3	Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15	Burning bush	Ps 103 (102)	1 Cor 10:1-6,10-12	Luke 13:1-9
Lent 4	Joshua 5:9-12	First Passover	Ps 34 (33)	2 Cor 5:17-21	Lk 15:1-3, 11-32
Lent 5	Isaiah 43:16-21	A new deed	Ps 126 (125)	Philippians 3:8-14	John 8:1-11

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us

1 Cor 10:1 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. 1 Cor 10:6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. 7 *Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."* 8 *We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.* 9 *We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.* 10 And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. 13 *No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading calls for careful introduction—otherwise, it will make no sense to the listeners of today. In a very allusive style, Paul puts before us again the call to conversion of heart and life.

KIND OF WRITING

Our section of the letter is devoted to restraint in the exercise of rights within the community of believers. The basic principle is “the strong” must not flaunt their freedom to the dismay of the “the weak.” The apostle himself restricts the exercise of his rights.

8:1-11:1: *Food sacrificed to idols*
 8:1-13 Knowledge versus love
 9:1-26 The rights of an apostle
 10:1-22 Warnings from Israel's history
 10:23-11:1 Do all for the glory of God

The warnings from the history of Israel are rehearsed and then interpreted allegorically. Because of the talk of “food and drink”, eucharistic practice and exclusion is not far from the Apostle's mind. It may even be that some Corinthians believed that the sacraments of baptism and eucharist would protect them in a magical way from falling.

Paul reads these past events as an allegory of the present. Such allegorical reading was quite in order at the time, as we see from this excerpt from Philo of Alexandria, Paul's great contemporary.

“For the sharp-edged rock is the Wisdom of God, ... from which he provides water for God-loving souls. And having been given drink they are filled with the manna, the most universal substance.... God is the most universal, and second, the Word of God.” (*Legum allegoriae* 2.86)

In this letter, Paul's concern is the double risk of idolatry and *porneia*, not unconnected.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

1 Corinthians was written after Paul's time in the city, so post AD 52. The letter confronts several issues in the Corinthian churches: ethical, doctrinal, ecclesial and sacramental. In the second part of the letter (7-16), Paul is responding to the letter he received from them.

RELATED PASSAGES

Paul is citing and alluding to many passages in the OT. Paul assumes that his listenership will pick up these allusions without difficulty. The force of the argument depends on recognising these allusions.

Exodus motifs
Cloud: Exodus 13:21-22
Sea: Exodus 14:22, 29
Manna and quail: Exodus 16:4, 8, 12
Spring: Exodus 17:6
Apostasy: Exodus 32:6, 18
Sexual immorality and punishment: Num 25:1-2, 9, 62.
Speaking against the Lord: LXX Ex 17:7; Num 21:7
The destroyer: Ex 12:23; 2 Sam 24:16; Wis 18:25
Testing: Zech 13:7.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The double negative means *I want you very much to know*. Paul teaches that the OT stories are ours also.

Verse 2-3 “Baptised” is a bit of a stretch, but he means by prefiguring. The manna was literally spiritual: bread *from heaven*.

Verse 4 Food and drink are joined together. “The rock that followed them” may surprise. Later Rabbinic tradition had it that the same stone produced water wherever the Israelites camped. The rock was Christ—that is, it is the same God accompanying Christians today. There may be a slight anti-Petrine polemic. There can be only one rock!

Verse 5 Even though they ate the same spiritual food and drink (just like the Corinthians), nevertheless, God was not pleased with them.

Verse 6 “As examples” lit. as *types*. The story is offered not as a prediction but as a warning. In effect, do not be so sure that the same may not happen to you. The omitted verses illustrate the risk.

Verse 10 The exodus motifs continue here in *complaining* and in *the destroyer*.

Verse 11 Paul's apocalyptic world view is apparent here. The time is now: *See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Verse 12 In another context, Paul writes something similar: *For if God did not spare the natural branches (= the Jews), perhaps he will not spare you (= the Gentiles).* (Romans 11:21)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Learning from the past is part of our spiritual journey. It may be easier and more profitable to think of *my own* false paths and delusions.

2. The feeling that whatever about others I am somehow immune is not unknown. Yet, we are all human and we all make mistakes and we all sin.

PRAYER

Faithful God, you are with us always, even when we stray. Help us to have confidence not in ourselves but in you, our rock and our salvation. Nourish us with the food and drink of your Spirit that we may continue on our pilgrim way towards you, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature

Ex. 3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Ex. 3:7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Ex. 3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Following the great narrative arc of the first readings of Lent, today we have the truly iconic scene of Moses and the burning bush. In this scene, the mysterious name of God—at the same time both revealing and concealing—is entrusted to Moses and to the people of Israel.

KIND OF WRITING

Exodus 3 functions as a theophany and as a call story. As a theophany, it has the classic signs of the *mysterium*, both *tremendum* and *fascinans*. As a call story, this is the fulcrum of the Pentateuch, bringing together the revelation of God, the suffering of the Israelites and the person and role of Moses. In a way, the rest of the Pentateuch explores and displays the consequences of this encounter.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Exodus is the central book around which the entire Pentateuch revolves.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." (Exodus 33:19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Moses is literally "shepherding", anticipating his future care of Israel. Horeb is the name given to Sinai in the Elohist and Deuteronomistic traditions.

Verse 2 The angel is really a manifestation of God. The Hebrew for bush is *seneh*, perhaps an echo of Sinai. Fire is a conventional symbol of the divine.

Verse 3 The paradoxical non-consummation of the consuming fire suggests the divine presence.

Verse 4 The "angel" is now revealed as the LORD himself. Doubling the name and "Here I am" cf. Abraham and Samuel.

Verse 5 Cf. *You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.* (Exodus 19:12)

Verse 6 Gazing directly at God is, by tradition, fatal (Ex 33:20; Is 6:5).

Verse 10 The command is strong: Now then! Sending constitutes the prophet. To bring out / to go out is a technical

term for the exodus itself.

Verse 11 Reluctance is a *topos* of call stories (cf. Jer 1; Is 6).

Verse 12 I will be with you: the limitless reassurance of God's presence found across the whole Bible: Gen 26:3; 31:3; Exod 3:12; Deut 31:23; Josh 1:5; 3:7; 7:12; Judg 6:16; 1 Kgs 11:38; Isa 43:2; John 7:33. I will be = *ehyeh*, already anticipating God's name v. 14.

Verse 13 A dangerous request because the name gives access to the person.

Verse 14 The Jewish Publication Society version refuses to translate at this point: *And God said to Moses, "EHYEH-ASHER-EHYEH."* (Exodus 3:14) The name reveals and conceals at the same time. We could translate the name as "I will be whatever I will be"—that is—my nature will become evident in my actions.

Verse 15 At this point the name Ehyeh is given in a third person form, YHWH and this becomes the standard. Following Jewish practice, English translations usually render it as the "LORD." By using small caps, the printers indicate that behind this lies not *adonai* (= lord, the generic term) but YHWH. The necessary link is then made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. v. 6). (These notes follow this printers' convention always.)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The moment of epiphany can be best entered through our own epiphanies, however minor and fleeting. When have I "felt" the presence of God?
2. All of us have been called by God, to greater and lesser roles. To what is God calling me now?
3. I will be with you / Emmanuel is a terrific guarantee and a challenge to be lived.

PRAYER

God, mysterious creator, father, lover: you have made yourself known to us through your servant Jesus as our Emmanuel.

In your light, we see light; in your being, we have being. Help us to embrace your wonderful gift of yourself through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; Ps 103 (102); 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12; Luke 13:1-9

READINGS 1 AND 3

We see patterns richly weaving the various threads into a convincing tapestry of grace, compassion, forgiveness and opportunity for conversion.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 103 (102) picks up the covenant qualities of God, already found in Exodus: “*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.* (Exodus 34:6-7)

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

Names are important to us and in this reading God gives us God’s own name. The name, YHWH, reveals and conceals: my nature will become evident in the actions.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Are there lessons from the past? Paul uses the story of the Exodus to shake up the Christians in Corinth.

Gospel

Luke 13:1-9

The gospel, too, is a little frightening: now is the time, so don’t lose the moment. At the same time, it is a parable of hope, because there is another chance, now, today. If not now, when?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 24 March

2 Kings 5:1-15

A very lively, realistic story prepares us for the Gospel reading. There are comic elements: the disappointment of Naaman and the utterly sensible advice of his servants.

Luke 4:24-30

Our reading is really the second part of an integrated scene in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus preaches in Nazareth and is initially well received. What we really have

here is a symbolic *tableau*, giving us the whole Gospel story of Jesus in a nutshell. The last elusive line points to Easter.

Tuesday 25 March

The Annunciation to the BVM



Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10

The birth of a child—as in this reading—is always a sign of hope.

Hebrews 10:4-10

Our reading today reflects on the death of Jesus, in the light of the incarnation.

Luke 1:26-38

In the Bible, there are stories of couples who cannot have children. An annunciation resolves the situation. Our annunciation is similar, yet significantly different on account of the child to be born — son of the Most High, descendant of Jacob and David, Jesus the Messiah.

Wednesday 26 March

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

Our reading reflects on God’s grace to Israel and on the consequent responsibility of the Israelites to live lives consistent with that grace. It was true long ago in Judaism; it is true today in our Christian proclamation.

Matthew 5:17-19

Matthew can disconcert with his quite conservative attitudes. It is important to remember that the Law (the Torah) meant three things at the time. It meant first of all the Pentateuch, which has lost none of its relevance for Christians. It also meant the Ten Commandments, which, in the time honoured phrase, have not gone away. Finally, it meant the rules governing the marks of Jewish identity, such as circumcision and the dietary laws. While these latter are in-

deed suspended for Christians, the moral law is, if anything, sharpened.

Thursday 27 March

Jeremiah 7:23-28

The ministry of Jeremiah encountered tremendous opposition. In fact, his book is divided into two parts, the first devoted to a rehearsal of the collapse of the independent kingdom of Judah. Within that, Jeremiah points out that the very faithlessness of the people was one of the causes of that calamity.

Luke 11:14-23

Just as the prophets encountered opposition, so did the Jesus. In the case of Jesus, the opposition accuses God’s prophet of aligning himself with the forces of evil. Already in Luke’s Gospel, we hear the story of the temptation, wherein Jesus resolutely rejects the devil.

Friday 28 March

Hosea 14:2-10

Hosea wrote in the 8th century BC, at a time of immense pressure from Assyria. He can be trenchant but is also a marvellous poet of the love of God. Listen by letting any of the moving metaphors touch our hearts.

Mark 12:28-34

This great passages takes us to the heart of the preaching of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

Saturday 29 March

Hosea 5:15-6:6

This is really a sarcastic reading. But, behind the biting sarcasm, is the beating heart of God, reaching out to us again and again.

Luke 18:9-14

The risk for us in reading this parable is that we find ourselves sitting in judgment on the Pharisee—that is, copying him in sitting in judgment on the tax collector. The latter’s heart-felt prayer for mercy is at the centre of the parable: can I make it my own?