

**Sermon for 7<sup>th</sup> March 2010**  
**Making A Difference in the World**  
**Lent 3 (1 Corinthians 10: 1-13 and Luke 13:1-9)**

Newspaper headlines are always full of sensationalism and bad news: Jon Venables accused of sex offences; Iraq enquiry row surrounds Gordon Brown ...

There were no newspapers in Jesus' time, but there was bad news and sensationalism, and that's what the disciples bring to Jesus in today's gospel reading: Rome butchers Temple worshippers; 18 dead as tower collapses. At that time, many believed disaster was a sign of God's punishment. In fact, there are still some today who talk about natural disasters as a sign of God's anger; the US televangelist Pat Robertson talked about the Haitian earthquake as God's vengeance for a pact Haitians made with the Devil to free themselves from French rule. Jesus is clear in his response: Rubbish, he says, it's got nothing to do with punishment from God. But, unless you change your behaviour, you'll die in the same way. The Jews, you see, were expecting a Messiah to come immanently to rescue them and send the Roman occupying forces packing. Jesus message was exactly the opposite, that God's kingdom would come through servanthood, love and self-sacrifice, not violence. Those who live by the sword, die by the sword he told one of the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:52). And unless they change their crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome, they would suffer the consequences.

How much more comfortable to stay with what we know. For 1st century Jews, to stay with their expectations of the Messiah who would rescue God's people. For us, much more comfortable to come to a beautiful, peaceful building, away from the corruption and ugliness of the world around us to sing God's praises and worship him. This will sustain us and enable us to bear the world we live in and make sense of it. We're safe within these walls. But that's not God's way for us. Jesus loves to tell stories to make his most cutting points, and here we have another one, the parable of the fig tree. Unless the fig tree bears fruit it is of no use and the gardener will dig it up. Unless God's people in 1st century Jerusalem remember God's way, they are no use and will suffer the consequences of their violent expectations. Unless God's people in 21st century Burghfield recognise God's way, we are no use and will suffer the consequences.

We're at the third in our series of five purpose statements. We're working towards our vision of the transformation of all human life in Christ. We've thought about the centrality of staying close to God, and the core task left to us by Jesus, making disciples of ourselves and others. Today we're considering making a difference in the world.

Our world and this community are in serious need of transformation – we don't need to look at headlines to know that, it's all around us. People live in materialistic isolation from one another, searching for happiness and success, but never quite finding it, blaming anyone but themselves when disaster strikes. And we, as God's people, are in the business of transformation. Our own lives are being transformed by God, step by step, until we become the image of Christ (Rom 8:29

& 2 Cor 3:18); and our world has been saved by Christ (Jn 3:16) and is now suffering the labour pains of the new life (Rom 8:23) that will come when Christ returns. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had a wonderfully cheeky way of expressing it to the white ruling minority in South Africa: during the darkest days of apartheid I used to say to P.W.Botha, the president of South Africa, that we had already won, and I invited him and other white South Africans to join the winning side. What hope! What faith!

Surely we cannot be among those who will be of no use to God because we have produced no fruit. That cannot be. We must listen to the warnings and make a difference in our world and our community. The opportunity to be centrally involved with a community organisation in our May Fayre is, I really believe, a God-given opportunity to get out of the building and be visible Christians in Burghfield, making a difference, showing people what God's love has done to transform us, and what God's love could do to transform them. Of course it's not as comfortable as staying safe within the walls of the church and worshipping God as we have always done. But the people out there whom God loves are not just going to walk through these doors and ask for transformation because they don't know they can find it here. We're going to have to go out there and show them that the only way to transformation and the fullness of life they're seeking is through Christ.

Our purpose for the next 3 years is to engage more with our community, through our involvement in events such as the May Fayre, and to take seriously our commitment to supporting local charities and worldwide mission. But also by being visible Christians wherever we are tomorrow morning at 9am, and the next day, and the next day.

If Christ is the gardener in the parable, he is pleading with God for you and me: Just give them 3 years. I'll feed them and transform them. Then if they bear fruit, well and good, but if not, they can face the consequences.

So let Christ feed you and transform you and this church, so that we might bear fruit and be useful, not only to this community, but to the Kingdom of God we seek to build. In Jesus' name I pray.

Blessings,  
Gill