**23rd March 2025**

**Luke 13.1-9**

**Call to worship**

Come and seek the Lord wherever you are.
**We call upon God, he is always near.**
Let go of your unkind ways of thinking and acting.
**We call upon God, he always has mercy.**
God will cleanse us of all our wrongdoing.
**We call upon God, he always gives new life.**

**A gathering prayer**

Creator God, as we gather today,
we know we have often failed to choose well.
Be with us, as we hear again
the stories of your limitless love
and measureless grace.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Are you thirsty? Are you hungry? Are your pockets empty?
Come, eat, drink and be satisfied.
For money cannot buy such soul-enriching fare
as you will find in the presence of our holy, merciful God.

**A prayer of adoration**

Merciful God, who directs our life,
**we adore you.**
Faithful God, who never changes,
**we adore you.**
Glorious God of forgiveness and second chances,
**we adore you.**
God of all nourishment,
**we adore you.**
All powerful, abundant God,
**we adore you.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Father God, you give us the gift of abundant life,
providing for our physical and spiritual needs.
We’re sorry for taking your provision for granted.
We’re sorry: when we lose sight of your loving mercy
and get wrapped up in our own self-indulgent desires;
for failing to rejoice and sing your praises;
for focusing on the negatives instead of the positives;
for being judgemental and not giving others a second chance.
**We repent, Father God:**
**help us to turn around and to bear good fruit.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God has mercy on all who turn to him.
He freely pardons and forgives our sins.
**We are free to begin anew.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise**

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, entwined as One,
we give you thanks and praise.
Our deepest longings are satisfied in you.
You allow us second chances, never giving up on us.
Repentance changes our life and shapes our future,
one that you tend and nurture, day by day.
You help us endure trials and temptations,
ensuring we are never pushed beyond
our boundary of endurance.
**Father, Son and Holy Spirit, entwined as One,**
**we give you thanks and praise for satisfying our souls.**
**All thanks and praise to you.**
**Amen.**

The play [‘Dear England’](https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/whats-on/dear-england-2023) has had an update. It’s the story of ex-England manager Gareth Southgate and it first hit the stage in 2023.

The real-life Gareth and his leadership of the England team inspired the playwright James Graham to pen a work that looked at the way Southgate took the once despondent and fairly unsuccessful England team to a group of players working together, loyal to their leader and, crucially, winning games. The intrigue was that the mild-mannered Gareth didn’t behave like famous successful club managers of the past – for example Alex Ferguson or Jose Mourinho – but embodied [a high empathy model](https://learn.englandfootball.com/articles-and-resources/coaching/resources/2022/Gareth-Southgate-my-coaching-approach#:~:text=%E2%80%9CMy%20approach%20would%20be%20to,to%20you%20and%20follow%20you.%E2%80%9D). He [took advice](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/dec/09/education-and-listening-helping-southgate-shape-his-happy-england) from different sports, talked about responsibility, kindness and unity and shifted the culture in the team that, whilst not quite lifting silverware, took them closer to the top than they had been since the infamous 1966 World Cup.

The new play out this week adds the update of the 2024 Euros to the story and the way Southgate led the team through the campaign. But perhaps more significantly, the play looks at the way Gareth is formed and how his ideals are shaped. And of course, the striking feature is that much of his learning, motivation and passion for the work rest on his moment of public failure - [the missed penalty in 1996](https://www.facebook.com/matchmagazine/videos/gareth-southgate-euro-96-missed-penalty/10153758280071751/).

The miss was seismic. It could have been the end. But Gareth was given, and took, a second chance. He replanted his failure, allowed it to grow in new soil and it bore rich fruit.

Today Gareth Southgate is no longer the England manager, but he continues to grow and influence others. He has just delivered the [Richard Dimbleby lecture](https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m00293l5/the-richard-dimbleby-lecture-sir-gareth-southgate) looking at [the toxic culture young boys can inhabit when they are free from good role models](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ceqjpzg0qwno) - a conversation that is important and necessary.

For the writer of Luke 13:8-9, Gareth Southgate is a living example of the power of a second chance.

**Ideas for sermons or interactive talks**

1. Have you ever been offered a second chance? - perhaps in a friendship/relationship, job or piece of work. Think about the consequences of the second chance and the feelings it prompted. Can you be the agent of a second chance for someone else? - for a friend, colleague or neighbour?
2. Use the words from Isaiah 55:1-9 as a prayer. Invite people to thank God for giving us the chance to come to him and receive his forgiveness and love over and over again. Thank God for not just one second chance, but a lifetime of chances to turn to him and receive all he has for us.

**Luke 13.1-9**

**Sermon**

My grandma was always anxious that we put on clean underwear every day just in case something bad happened to us and we needed medical attention which involved us being stripped down to our pants.

Bad stuff happens all around us, even if we have the inestimable privilege of living in a time and place that is not experiencing war or civil unrest, famine or flood, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, or indeed a pandemic. Every week some ten or eleven thousand people die in England and Wales from a wide variety of causes: many peacefully in old age, but many after long struggles with illness or injury, some still relatively young, and others through accidents or violence. Physical pain and sickness find their close counterparts in grief and mental illness. For others again, suffering arises as consequence of external circumstances: poverty, unemployment, homelessness, bullying, prejudice or – topically – unexpected increases in energy or food costs.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As the war in the Ukraine shockingly continues, the Israelis continue to bomb Gaza, we may struggle to handle our sadness at the loss of life and homes. Watching scenes of devastation, we long for their suffering to end.

Today’s Gospel reading is unclear on whether Jesus thought that Pilate’s cruelty, rather than the Galileans’ sins, was responsible for the latter’s suffering, or that, say, shoddy construction was the cause of the 18 deaths in the Tower of Siloam incident. What is clear is that he totally refuted his hearers’ belief that the suffering was either their own fault or any kind of divine punishment for their past behaviour. This is consistent with his teaching, ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged’ (Matthew 7.1; Luke 6.37). Judgement is God’s prerogative, and God’s alone.

Rather than entering into the ‘why’ of tragedies, Jesus’ concern is for us to respond to the fragility of life, by living out the Kingdom values of love, compassion, forgiveness and grace. Our day-to-day actions, attitudes and choices are opportunities to enable a more compassionate and loving society. It doesn’t matter who is suffering, or why we may think they’re suffering; our Christ-like vocation is always to relieve suffering.

Do you have an attitude that you wish to change? Pray for change each day this week, and that you may become more ‘fruitful’.

That said, Jesus does issue a warning ‘But unless you repent, you too will all perish.’

Jesus is not interested in the details of the stories. Nor is he keen on the debate that was clearly going on about the victims perhaps being punished for wrongdoing. He makes it quite clear that whether or not these victims were 'worse offenders' than anyone else would not be God's main concern. He seems to be saying that what matters is to be spiritually ready for death, should it arrive suddenly. The priority, as Jesus sees it, is the spiritual equivalent of having one's underwear clean and presentable should one meet an accident unexpectedly.

Perhaps this message makes us uncomfortable because our culture doesn't care for reminders about death – especially untimely death.

Johnny was going home one day past his grandfather's house with a couple of his chums.  As they passed the house they spied the old gentleman out on his porch in his rocking chair with a big black book (the bible) on his lap reading rather intently.

"What's your grandfather doing", asked one of Johnny's friends.

"Oh - grandpa - he's revising for his finals", Johnny replied.

None of us can put off the day when we are called home for the finals - home to account for what we have done and what we have not done.

The elephant in the room about any talk about faith in God is about fear and threat and punishment – what if you don’t accept the good news of Jesus Christ? What if you reject God?

Most of our society don’t do God. Yet when bad things happen they may get angry. They may ask ‘where is God?’ Those questions are always there when we feel life has been unfair and random.

As a minster I often do funerals of people who have had a raw deal out of life. I say ‘if there is no God, then all we are left with here is a sad day, marking a sad loss, and all we can say in a downcast type of way is ‘that’s life! But if there is God then there is the hope that this sad day will not be the last day, the end of the story. On the third day…..’

Fear is a fundamental feature of human existence and Jesus took this fear, which people felt, seriously. He does not try to gloss over it or pretend its not there. He simply asks, in effect, if we are fearful, what is it that we should truly fear. What is the most fearful thing that could happen? Jesus suggests that the most fearful thing that could happen is to be cut off forever from the living God. But if we turn our heart and mind to that living God, we find that we are of infinite value.

Just a chapter earlier Jesus comments (Luke 12. 4-7)

***4****“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.****5****But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.*

But then Jesus goes on and describes this awesome God into whose hands we will fall, full of fear and trembling:

***6****Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.****7****Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

When we turn to God we find we are of infinite value. We need have no fear*. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4.16-19)*

There are hard sayings in the Bible which it is dishonest to ignore. They bring home to us the crucial importance of the decisions we make in this life, through which we shape the souls of other people and ourselves. Through our decisions we make ourselves into people who one day will come to the searing gentleness of divine light when all will be seen for what it is.

We are left with a tension, a proper tension between the seriousness of the moral life and trust in an all-loving God. If we take seriously the moral claims which life makes upon us, then any trace of self satisfaction and self righteousness must be quickly eliminated. If we take seriously how much we mean to God then all self condemnation and fear will be dissolved.

St Augustine caught the tension when he wrote about the two people crucified either side of Christ

‘Do not despair (he wrote); one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.

I think St Augustine overstated his case. One thief asked for forgiveness and Jesus promised he would be with him in paradise. The other cursed and mocked Jesus. But crucially Jesus didn’t curse and mock him back. He didn’t say anything to him but did pray for all ‘*Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

Who can be saved? With God all things are possible.

St Augustine also said he would rather God be the judge than his mother!

Having said all that perhaps Jesus is not talking about what happens when people die in this passage. He says in verse five *‘But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

The key words are ‘you too’. In line with the warnings Jesus has issued several times already and will continue to issue right up to his crucifixion, Jesus could be making clear that those who refuse his summons to change direction, to abandon the crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome, will suffer the consequences. Those who take up the sword will perish by the sword.

When Jerusalem fell in AD70. It was a bloody attempt at revolution and great loss of life occurred. One could say it was a direct result of refusing to follow the way of non-violent peaceful resistance which Jesus had urged throughout his ministry.

There's a second part to the message of Jesus in the passage from Luke. It ties in with our contemporary passion for gardens and all things horticultural. Very often on TV programmes you hear about what to do when a plant is not bearing the expected fruit. There's usually a description of how the plant has been cared for and advice on how to get it back to flowering or fruiting as it should. Sometimes the verdict is to scrap this plant and start again – or even that this is not the right place to try growing this species: don't even bother to get another.

*Soil was at a premium in Israel. It was not unusual for a vineyard owner to give a little bit of his soil up for a fruit tree but the tree took up the best soil, the deepest soil, and required the most water. A fig tree doesn't grow fruit until three years after planting. The owner in this story, had given the tree "due season" to bear fruit and yet the tree bore no fruit. It took up valuable space and resources. The owner questioned why the tree was
allowed to "even use up ground."

God had given the Israelites the choicest ground. Their land possessed everything necessary to make themselves a great nation, indeed, a light to all nations. They were strategically positioned to send the fruit of God north and south, east and west; but instead, in-fighting continued to make them a worthless fruit tree.*
Everyone one of us and all of our churches will have to answer (from God's perspective) this same question; "Why does it even use up the ground?" Are we bearing fruit?

We certainly live in neurotic times when there is great anxiety among people to achieve all they can. Parents are anxious that their children get to the right schools and do themselves justice. Sometimes we have unrealistic expectations and they can be crushing.

The point is that life does not ask us to become what we are not. The fig tree was only required to produce figs. No more. You and I are asked only to accomplish what our gifts and personalities allow. But we are asked to accomplish just that.

Another way to describe the Christian attitude toward bearing fruit in our lives and toward moral and spiritual effort, is to remember the words of Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me."

We would also do well to make a motto out of a line from Saint Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. He expressed this same profound paradox when he wrote: "Work hard and struggle as if everything depended on you; yet pray and trust God as if everything depended on God."

These sayings of Jesus and this parable of the fig tree contain a tension at the heart of them. The need for responsibility and action: the dependence on God who brings all things to fruition.

May we be ready for whatever comes. May we bear the fruit of faith in God.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, we choose to turn back to you.
**Help us to start afresh: renewed and restored.**

Lord, we come to you admitting our weakness and failure.
Thank you for giving us the chance to turn around and start afresh with you.

Indeed, Lord, you are the God of second chances and we know, in our lifetimes, you have been the God of third and fourth chances, forgiving and restoring us a countless number of times. We are profoundly grateful. We know that without you, we would have no hope and yet, because of your love, we remain your children – even if rather wayward children at times.

Lord, we choose to turn back to you.
**Help us to start afresh: renewed and restored.**

Lord, as we think about the disasters that Jesus spoke about, we remember things we have heard on the news this week that have shocked or saddened us. We remember particularly…. the Middle East as the ceasefire has crumbled and more people are dying. We think of the progress of diplomacy between Russia, the USA and Ukraine. Lord, may your words of peace and love rule in these places. May conflict cease and goodness return.

We also pray for those places which are no longer in the headlines but are still seen and remembered by you…

And we pray for the people or places that never make the news, where only you see the hurt and the pain. We know how much it grieves your heart of love. We pray for those who are trafficked or abused…  those who suffer from addictions and long to be free... those who are in prison…  or feeling desperately alone... . We long to see the world restored to the way in which you intended it. Lord, may your kingdom come.

Lord, we choose to turn back to you.
**Help us to start afresh: renewed and restored.**

Lord, we think of those who we have struggled to give a second chance to this week… perhaps a friend or colleague who let us down; someone in our class who was annoying; someone in a shop who was rude or someone who cut us up in traffic; a family member that was trying our patience. We pray for each of those people now, whether they are known to us or just an incident we remember... Give us the grace to forgive and the patience to accept situations that we cannot control.

And we think of all those who have given *us* second chances this week... We pray for them now with gratitude for their kindness and patience.

Lord, we choose to turn back to you.
**Help us to start afresh: renewed and restored.**

**Amen**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Loving God, we are sorry for the times we have messed up.
We are so very grateful that you are a forgiving God.
Help us to be people who give others second chances.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Loving God,
thank you for your promise to do something new in each of our lives.
Help us to give people a second chance, as you do for us,
today, in the week ahead and always.
**Amen.**

A prayer for all ages together

*Practise saying ‘tick tock’ to sound like a big clock, accompanied by a swinging arm pendulum motion. Repeat this after every line except the last.*

Lord of time,
you are patient with us.
You give us time to change.
You allow time to grow.
Help us grow this week.
Amen.

A sending out prayer

Lord God, you look for growth and fruit;
help us this week to grow closer to you,
and to be patient when we have to wait –
as you are patient with us.
Amen.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/118-march-april-2022-c/lent-3/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)