

Sermon for Holy Trinity on Sunday 23 March 2025 – The Third Sunday of Lent

Texts: Isaiah 55.1-9; 1 Corinthians 10.1-15 (at 10h30 only); Luke 13.1-9.

Shining as a light in the world

I don't know how many of you have heard of or seen the film '*Super-Size Me*'. This was an American documentary film directed by and starring Morgan Spurlock. For a month he ate nothing but food from Macdonalds to measure the impact it would have on his body. The effects were dramatic. In this diet he was consuming about 5000 calories a day and he put on nearly 11 kilos in weight. His liver fat and cholesterol also soared, and he became prone to extreme mood swings.

Fast food and its accompanying drinks can be very attractive – they are bright, accessible, easy to eat and often cheaper than alternative meals. For children too there are often additional incentives including free plastic toys and specially packaged kids' meal deals. But they are not good for the body and ultimately can have long-term damaging effects and become addictive.

We also face similar temptations in how we use one of the most precious resources we have which is the gift of time, as well as how we spend our money. One example of this is how we use our smartphones, ipads and computers. Whilst they can be of huge benefit when used wisely for our work and also learning at school, we can be tempted to spend excessive time on social media, videos and even online gambling which can be harmful as it becomes increasingly addictive. It affects our young people as well. Recent research in the UK showed a 52% increase in children's use of screen time and that nearly 25% of children and young people use their smartphones in a way that is consistent with a behavioural addiction.

The Bible however shows us a very clear alternative – one which is life-giving and not destructive. In the passage from Isaiah we heard today, the prophet challenges the people to think about their behaviour. "Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and labour for that which does not satisfy?" In other words, why are you wasting the precious gift of your lives on things which are superficial and will bring you no lasting benefit?

Instead, Isaiah urges the people to turn to God and to root themselves in Him. He has the wonderful image of God providing the people with a rich feast – a food which will nourish their souls as they find in God, that which will give their lives ultimate meaning,

This is a leitmotif which runs right through the Bible. There is another lovely image in Psalm 1 of the person who roots themselves on God being like a tree beside a river which draws its life from that river and is fruitful. And Jesus taught his disciples and followers that he was the living bread and the living water. He is the bread which will nourish us in all the challenges we face in this life. He is the living water which wells up in us, enabling us to have a foretaste in this life, of the life and joy of that eternal life into which we are called by God.

But how do we find this living bread and living water which God offers to us in Christ? Again, our Bible passages make it clear for us today. The starting point is for us realise our need for God. As long as we are focused on what we might call 'The junk food of our lives – that is our preoccupation with ourselves and what gives us immediate pleasure and satisfaction, it's hard for us to hear and notice God's great invitation to us. But if we have the courage to stop, to ask ourselves whether the life we are leading really has ultimate purpose and meaning, then we can begin to open our hearts to God.

What is really important in this is for us to be honest about ourselves and our own weakness and sinfulness. It is why often we start to ask serious questions about ourselves and our lives when things go badly wrong, for it then that we realise we are not so much in control of our lives as we had thought. Isaiah urges the people to seek the Lord while he may be found. It is when we look at ourselves honestly in a spiritual mirror and recognise the truth of how we really are, that we begin to see our need for God.

It is why Baptism is such an important sacrament for it marks our decision to reject those things which are harmful and destructive and instead to turn to Christ as the source of true life. For in doing so, we are acknowledging our own sinfulness and weaknesses and instead put our trust in Christ. This is symbolised by the water, marking both the washing away of our sins, and our entry into the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit. It is why we are so delighted that Dan is taking this step today and that last Sunday, the parents and godparents of baby Zaia took these solemn promises on her behalf.

Underlying all this is the need for us to be truly honest not just about the nature of the world in which we live but also about ourselves. In our Gospel today, there is a clear challenge for us to consider the problem of evil and in particular, why bad things happen to people who are good. It's a question we all agonise with when faced with the tragedy of such things as children who are killed, our loved ones stricken with serious illnesses or lives cut short in terrible accidents.

In this passage for St Luke, messengers share with Jesus the grim news that Pontius Pilate has ordered the murder of Galilean pilgrims who were offering sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a massacre – their own blood mingling with that of the animals they were sacrificing and thus both physically and spiritually polluting the temple. It was one of the acts of gratuitous cruelty for which Pilate was renowned and which were recorded in other historical sources in addition to the Bible.

Jesus challenged the crowd around him – "Did they think this had happened because these men were particularly sinful? He also reminded them of another recent tragedy – that of the collapse of the tower of Siloam which had collapsed killing eighteen people. Did they think this had happened because those eighteen people were particularly bad?

"No, they weren't any better or worse than you are", Jesus went on to tell the crowd. But what matters here is how we respond to such tragedies. Think first of all about

your own sinfulness and how that contributes to the evils of the world around you. The think too of the nature of the society which you are living and how you are responding?

Jesus' words are a challenge to us too. First of all, when bad things happen, we can be tempted to blame God particularly if they happen to someone dear to us (Why did God let this happen to him/her?) or blame the person for bringing it on themselves. But Jesus asks us to go deeper, to recognise those sins in ourselves and repent and also to see where we, often by our complicity, help support unjust or corrupt systems which damage others.

For example, Jesus' reference to the Tower of Siloam which collapsed reminded me of another tragedy, which has happened in recent times in London, that of the Grenfell Tower block of flats which caught fire in 2017, killing 72 residents. There was an inquiry into the cause of the fire which reveals multiple failings including use of inappropriate cladding material which was combustible, and shoddiness in the handling of checks and desire to save money.

What matters is how we respond. If we are rooting ourselves in the living bread and living water of Christ, then we are empowered by Him to witness, to make a difference in the world. But this will depend on the choices we make. Will we stand up and do this? Or do we prefer a quiet untroubled life in which the evils of the world and injustices suffered by so many people, wash over us whilst we bury our heads in the sand?

As Jesus' followers see what Pilate and the religious leaders are plotting, they try hard to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem where he is convinced that he must bring his ministry to fulfilment. But Jesus is resolute – he must go, he must confront the reality of evil and pain through human sin and demonstrate that in God, there is another, a better way of life, rooted in love, forgiveness and mutual care. It is a witness that he will ultimately make by his death on the Cross when he reconciles all things to him.

We may feel helpless, frustrated and indeed scared when faced with the enormous suffering and evils we see taking place all around us in the world today. We see the impact of those who wield tremendous political power and the devastation which their decisions are making. Surely anything we might hope to do is a mere drop in the ocean?

Well, yes and no. Each act of kindness, of mercy, of forgiveness, of reconciliation we make is tiny and certainly is unlikely to make the news on our TVs and radios let alone reach the ears of the world's leaders. But is through the glimpses of light we can show, the signs of hope we can offer and the small acts of courageous witness against cruelty and injustice, that God's hope can be made visible. As Portia says in Shakespeare's play; *The Merchant of Venice*'

*How far that little candle sheds its beams,
So shines a good deed in a naughty world'.*

This is the true life to which God is calling every one of us for in living in this way, we find our true identity as children of God. Today we have heard God's call to us to leave those things which have no lasting value (the junk food and occupations of this world) and instead offer ourselves to be lights of God's truth and hope in the world. It is a hope we express and will express at the end of this service today, when we give Dan a candle lit from the Easter candle, that now that he is baptised. He will 'Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father'. May we all seek to walk in the light of Christ and be lights for His hope in the world.

Amen.