

Vanity

Jesus gets a lot of questions from the crowd, and it's helpful to understand that most of the questions that the Gospel writers choose to remember are particularly designed to try and pull Jesus into a debate that the questioner feels is of supreme importance. The case of the Galileans is a loaded one for sure. Pilate almost certainly did what he did out of a political motive, because apparently killing these folks wasn't enough, he needed to demonstrate his determination to crush them by also desecrating them by mingling their blood with pagan sacrifices. So they were probably rebels, most likely religious zealots of some sort, maybe the sort that people think Jesus might be. The questioner may be trying to get Jesus to incriminate himself, or he may just be trying to decide whether Jesus is actually the Messiah they had been looking for, but as usual Jesus gives them an answer they had probably not seen coming

"Do you think they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Wait, what? That's not how that was supposed to go! How did Jesus go from zero to hostile in three seconds flat? He offers another, perhaps less charged example, some people killed when a tower fell on them, a natural disaster, not an act of political brutality, but one that "most people," would assign some sort of divine judgment aspect. I'll be honest with you, this gets a little confusing on the surface, because Jesus seems to be rejecting the idea that these people somehow deserved to die, yet he is also saying to the people asking the question that they had better repent, or else they're going to perish too.

On the one hand we have a bit of the bracing nihilism of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes: everything has a time, good, bad, wise, foolish, rich, poor, it doesn't matter, we're all going to be dirt eventually, it's all vanity and chasing after the wind. But then he says that repentance does matter, and he tells this parable about the fig tree, and the parable is open ended, we are not told if the gardener's forbearance and patience is rewarded or not. It is helpful to sort of gauge the tone of this entire section of Luke's Gospel, it seems to me that Jesus is growing frustrated in a lot of these encounters. Something about what he is saying is struggling to break through our vanity.

A lot of the struggle to understand actually goes back to how you feel about Ecclesiastes. Not how you understand Ecclesiastes, or how you make sense of it, but how you feel it in your guts. Now you may not have ever dealt with the most peculiar book in the Bible extensively enough to have had an emotional connection with it. Maybe you've just heard the "time for everything" part, so I'm going to try to sum up the argument as simply as I can: we are given a life, we don't know how long it will be or whether it will be good or bad, peaceful or troubled, but we have one life, and God is a reality in that life, whether we care or not. What we do with our life matters; all of us will be both blessed and cursed at some point, all of us will be a blessing and a curse at some point. We will be wise and we will be foolish, and at some point we will be dust, but our life still matters, no matter how great or how small, because God is in us. Jesus Christ demonstrates for us what that looks like and if we are his disciples we follow that example.

We create all sorts of categories to try and quantify what God is up to, and who is part of God's plan and who is not, but it is all vanity. It is the vanity that we need to repent of, the vanity that says we deserve more days, or that doesn't appreciate the ones we have been given. Wendell Berry, in one of his novels about the people of the fictional town of Port William, tells the story of Hannah Coulter, who loses the love of her life before she turns 20, her first husband Virgil is killed in World War I, she lives through the Great Depression, she marries a man who is a good husband, but who never quite replaces what she

lost, she has children that grow up and move away, she has struggles and triumphs, joy and sadness, and at the end of things sums up her time with the simple plainspoken motto, “you live the life you’re given.”

We cannot, we should not, be waiting for things to be perfect, we should be busy bearing fruit. This is what frustrates Jesus in this part of Luke’s Gospel, the people of the covenant are waiting for God to do something, and as they wait they are missing the chance that they have to live their lives. They spend their time worrying about rules and regulations, arguing amongst themselves, fretting about Herod and Caesar, waiting for a Messiah to come and save them, obsessing about tragedies they cannot change. Sound familiar? It should, it is what the mass of humanity spends most of its time doing, and it’s all vanity.

I think we tend to ask the wrong questions. We ask God why instead of how. We think too much about what kind of fruit we “want” to bear, and forget that the fruit we bear is determined by the kind of tree that we are. We look for answers when Christ is always right there. We insist on our vanity so deeply that we can barely see it, let alone repent of it. But repent we must, we don’t know when the tower might fall on us and it does no good to worry about it. We have been told, in pretty clear terms, what we are to do: Love one another, all other considerations are vanity and chasing after the wind.