

It is good to be here. Thank you for the invitation to be part of your Lent. It is always a joy to come to new place; to make new Christian friends; to join in worship; to see Roly once again; and then to preach on the readings. In particular readings that ..... speak of judgement!

In our first reading from 1 Cor. 10 we have Paul using the example of the Israelites in the wilderness. They have so much to guide and lead them: there is the cloud (and indeed the pillar of fire); there is manna and quails to sustain them; there is rock that provided water (Paul seems to be using a tradition that said the rock followed them through the wilderness). But despite all this .... they go astray!

*Nevertheless, God was not pleased with them, and they were struck down in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5)*

In our reading from Luke 13 we have the account of Galileans struck down by Pilate in the temple as they offered sacrifice. It is not the first time Pilate has resorted to violence. One suggestion is that he feared a riot.

There is also news of people who died in a building accident with the collapse of the tower of Siloam.

Jesus clear is clear! This is not punishment for sin; but rather visible symbols of what happens when you lose your way with God. And of course Jesus very much had AD70 in mind; as did the Gospels writers. That time when the temple was destroyed which all its impact on Judaism. Jesus is saying: if you don't repent, one way or the other you will carry the consequences.

So it is good to be here! And the message is those immortal words of Private Frazer *We're all doomed*. You're so glad you invited me!

Except that is not the whole message. Look again! Both passages have vital endings; Both endings need noticing!

Paul in 1 Corinthians, having outlined the sins of the Israelites – idolatry, sexual immorality, complaining, testing God – and explained how they are to be examples to all of us, then says some amazing words: *God is faithful*. He will not test us beyond our resources. In the love of God, you have the way forward.

Quite some years ago now I was Vicar of a particularly tough housing estate in Sheffield – the Manor. As a church we were tested in many ways There was a history of losing buildings! The Church of England congregation had first seen their church demolished (bad design): then the Baptist Church to which they moved was also demolished; and by the time we arrived it was Anglicans in the vicarage and Baptists above the Co-op. In due course we invited the Baptists to use the vicarage as well (C of E in the morning; Baptists in the afternoon and Sunday School in the kitchen); before we went on to build a new church together. Events on the estate were often tough; and when the new church was built it was often vandalised. It wasn't easy being the church there!

However, when it came to laying the Foundation Stone of the new church we wanted words that spoke to our experience. In the end we took them from a hymn. The stone read: *Great is thy faithfulness*. God is faithful. That was our experience. He gave us the resources to persevere, to grow, and to witness. We could easily have gone under, but God provided.

In Luke we have the story of the unfruitful fig-tree; the tree that stands as a symbol of the fruitfulness to which we are called. And if there is no fruit the tree deserves to be cut down. But what does Vineyard owner say to the gardener? Give it one more year. Yes, there is judgement if we go on rejecting the love of God; we are accountable to God. But the God who is love gives us another chance. Indeed, what is the gardener told to do? He is to put in more – to provide manure.

Sometime ago I confirmed 'Daddy' in Bedford Prison – that was how he was known. 'Daddy' was running out of chances in every sense. He was running out of chances legally; he was running out of chances for himself. There was a real possibility that he would be entrapped for ever in criminality, as had happened to others in his family.

But there he was! Kneeling before me; affirming his faith; being confirmed. Even more movingly he gave his testimony; he spoke of how he wanted to change his life; how God was giving him another chance. He could do that because God is like that!

Sorry Private Frazer, you're wrong! We are not all doomed.

The Prodigal Son, when he had squandered his resources, is not doomed; Peter, when he denies Jesus, is not doomed; Jesus who cries 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me!' is not doomed. You and me, sinful and fallible human beings, are not doomed.

In many ways that should be enough for us today. But one further thought as we respond to these readings.

As we hear this message of hope; we also need to respond in lives of discipleship; attend to how we live more under the love of God who is faithful; who gives us second chances. Of course there are many ways to do that; so one Bedfordshire image with which to end.

Dominating the landscape near where we live in Cardington, just outside Bedford, are two huge hangers. Originally these were the sheds where airships were built and from where they flew. In particular, the sheds are associated with the infamous R101 which crashed in France on its maiden flight killing almost everyone on board; a crash which brought the construction of airships to an end.

One of those hangers, however, is being used for the construction of airships once more. Although this time it is a Hybrid Air-Ship (it has four propellers to aid movement) that is filled with helium rather than the explosive hydrogen.

Ever since we moved to the village I have wanted to visit the hangers and two weeks ago I finally made it. Along with some of the local clergy we saw both the hanger and the hybrid air-ship. Both are remarkable pieces of engineering with the air-ship being especially exciting, both in terms of design and its potential for environmentally friendly flight in the future.

It was a great visit! But one thing particularly caught my attention.

After Easter test flights will begin, but until then the pilots must train on a simulator. This they are finding useful. Amongst everything else they have discovered that there is a seven second delay between an action and it taking effect. Turn the wheel to change direction and it is seven seconds before the air-ship responds. Just imagine driving your car and when you turn the wheel or apply the brake, nothing happens for seven seconds!

However, what if we applied a seven second pause before we speak; before we act; before we send the email!

If we took seven seconds to ensure we didn't get our priorities wrong (the idolatry of which St Paul writes); to ensure we didn't do something to impair a relationship or make a wrong relationship (sexual immorality); to ensure we don't put God to the test; to avoid complaining?

Or if we take the seven seconds between thought and action to remember the faithfulness of God; to take the seven seconds to focus on how we might bear fruit in what we do, or say.

We are not doomed. Private Frazer was wrong! Let us today focus on the faithfulness of God; let us focus on the God who gives second chances; and this Lent, let us take 7 seconds ....