

INVITATION to an OPPORTUNITY

St Columba, 7 March 2010

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Isaiah 55: 1-9

Luke 13:1-9

Introduction to the Readings

Our first reading today comes from Isaiah. Scholars now recognise this book is the work of 3 authors or groups, writing out of different times.

Today's reading comes from the end of what we call 'second Isaiah', written a little more than 500 years before Jesus, during the time of the Israelites' exile in Babylon (the place we now know as Iraq (tensions in the Middle East have roots that go back a long way!)) The people are living in hope, looking forward to the time they can journey back to their homeland (that 'journey' theme links with Lent).

The reading we hear soon begins using the form of an invitation of that day, then uses food and drink as ways of talking about spiritual life, life with God. The invitation becomes a call to respond to God, recognising that God 'thinks differently' from us (that God invites us to re-think what's important).

The gospel, from Luke, also picks up this 're-thinking' (closely related to the ideas of 'conversion' and 'repentance'). All part of the Lenten journey, in which we reflect on our lives in preparation for Easter.

Jesus (or Luke) tells a fig tree parable (one of several! Fig trees were common in those days, and important for food and the economy. Here, the fig tree gets another chance: it's an invitation to take the opportunity offered.

AFTER THE READINGS - THE SERMON

Introduction

We have a fig tree, down by the labyrinth - Susan has had trouble finding figs this year: they're not nearly as plentiful as last year, and she's wondered if should be pulled out - I think, though, that it will get another chance to see how it does next year.

Some parables can keep on being very relevant; just as we can keep on getting more chances, new opportunities.

1. Invitation

We say our Christian story is good news!

*It's better news from the front pews...
Invite you to come to the front pews to hear our good news...
An invitation...*

Central to the Christian good news is **invitation**:

we are not compelled to respond to God's call; we are invited
- and that's one reason why the news is good.

Sometimes we do express our sense of God's call as being "unavoidable"; we *can* feel we have no option but to respond to the gospel Jesus brings!

Certainly, we hear of "conversions" or "calls to ministry" that are like that: the message is so strong, the call so clear, the divine presence so overwhelming, that a person is "caught up" and, almost despite themselves, brought into the

Christian life.

I was a Billy Graham convert... 1950s... stirring preaching... emotive singing... irresistible...

What I have come to recognise, though, is that God does not exert that kind of pressure.

Yes, God calls to us; yes, God's presence can be real; yes, we can hear Jesus' words ringing in our ears.

But always that is invitation, not compulsion.

Theologically, we call that -grace
God is a gracious, inviting, God, not a demanding, controlling one.

2. Opportunity

And what God invites us to is *opportunity*.

If you responded to my invitation to the front pews, there is still no guarantee that you will see or hear better or get to communion first. It's still up to us to pay attention, to switch our hearing aid on, to be able to move easily to the communion rail.

Again, once we respond to God's invitation, we are not *made* to do anything. That would take away our human free-will and responsibility.

If we think that God inevitably does things for us when we respond to God, we have an inadequate picture of God; and expecting God to fix everything or make us act the right way cuts across what we

understand as ethics or morality.

Rather, like the woman at the bus stop in Joy Cowley's poem, we are offered a *chance*, an opportunity to grow, to change our lifestyle, to think differently about our world.

That's the fig tree parable.

Conclusion

Embedded in our Lenten journey towards Easter is an invitation to be part of God's good news.

It's an open invitation, given in the spirit of *inviting*, where we *want* someone to come. But we're not going to be forced ó God invites us.

And that invitation is to an opportunity. Nothing is forced on us ó we're presented, over and over again, with opportunities to re-think the way we relate to others, the kinds of activities we think are important, the way we respond to God.

This Lent, let's open our ears to that invitation.

Then let's open our hearts and minds to the opportunities God provides.