

Lent 3

I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

HSM & Wotton

To quote Mark Twain ‘Some people are troubled by the things in the bible they can’t understand. The things that trouble me are the things I can understand.’ I know what he means. This weeks readings left me feeling a little like this!

This morning’s readings are about disappointment, and they are challenging texts to work with.

So let’s do some work with them. In I Corinthians, Paul is working with some stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, “The Old Testament.” Here the disappointment seems to belong to God. Some of the Hebrews who were with Moses did not live up to

expectations so they were struck down in the wilderness. Some engaged in sexual immorality and 23,000 fell in one day. Others were destroyed by serpents. Yikes. God, it would seem, has a particularly harsh way of dealing with disappointment, though I think we need to do a little more thinking here.

Paul's point is not that you better watch out because God is going to get you. His point is this. Think about people who were with Moses, with Moses! They must have had some incredible experiences of God. Yet even some of them lost their way. "Take care, people," Paul seems to be saying. "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." Paul is writing to a group of people who were often very proud. It was as if

nothing bad would happen to them, they were so spiritually attuned. There would be no challenges, struggles, disappointments.

Paul is trying to tell them something else. Sometimes things get hard, but God is with us. Just as an aside - I think verse 13 is often used as a justification for the idea that “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I don’t think that way of putting things is helpful. The particular context here is about falling away from faith. There is nothing that happens that you cannot, with God, make it through. The idea that God never gives you more than you can handle is too superficial sometimes when people are in the midst of tragedy.

In some ways, Luke is a good corrective to a too superficial a treatment of the idea that God never

gives someone more than they can handle, and it provides some fodder for deeper thinking about tragic events.

Jesus is presented with two tragic events, cruel treatment of Galileans by Pilate, and the fall of a tower. Some seemed to be saying to Jesus that such suffering must have occurred because of how terrible these people were. Jesus rejects that, rejects the idea that God was punishing people, or even testing people through such events. Instead, Jesus invites those who are coming to him with questions to think about their own lives. Then he tells a story about disappointment.

The owner of a fig tree finds no fruit on it and orders his gardener to cut it down. It has produced no fruit in three years. This man is disappointed in

the tree. The gardener, on the other hand, though he may share in the disappointment, urges patience. More can be done – a little digging, a little manure. Let's see what may happen.

Disappointment. It is part of our experience of life and it is a challenging emotion. Experiences sometimes let us down. Other people sometimes let us down. We let ourselves down. We disappoint others. We disappoint God. All of these are dimensions of disappointment, and in the rest of today's sermon I'd like to explore them a little with you.

How as people of faith do we deal with disappointment? Disappointment will happen. The super-spiritual Corinthians were wrong to think otherwise. How do we deal with it in ways that help

us grow in faith, hope and love? Where is God in the midst of our disappointments? Those who came to Jesus were wrong in thinking that disappointment and tragedy were somehow always the result of people's own mistakes or sins. Disappointment happens even to the nicest and best people.

I'd like to share with you what may seem a trivial disappointment but for me, at the time was quite big.

I was around 7 years old and had had been walloped on the head by a door which caught the wind and hit me here. I ended up in hospital for observation.

Now, I'd had my eye on a 'Girls world' for a while.

For those that don't know this was a model of a girls head that you could do her make up and her hair! I

really wanted one. But my Mum and I lived in a council flat in Cambridge, and money was tight – so it wasn't really a realistic expectation.

However, when my mum came into see me in hospital she bought me a present. And you guessed it – it was a Girls World. Although it wasn't. It was the cheap, rip off version. Not the real deal at all. Imagine wanting a pair of Nike trainers and being given some from George at Asda – it was that kind of let down.

Ungrateful – yes, but majorly disappointed!

So what good is disappointment, if it is good at all? Disappointment is a good mirror emotion, by that I mean it reflects something important. Disappointment reflects that we care, that we dream, that we risk. It is good that we care

and dream and take some risks. Disappointment is not really a good in itself, but it says something good about us – that we continue to care, that we continue to dream, that we continue to take some risks.

Rabbi Harold Kushner a few years ago wrote a book about Moses. He called it Overcoming Life's Disappointments. As he often is, Rabbi Kushner was wise about disappointment. *Nobody gets everything he or she yearns for: I look at the world and see three sorts of people: those who dream boldly even as they realize that a lot of their dreams will not come true; those who dream more modestly, and fear that even their modest dreams may not be realized; and those who are afraid to dream at all, lest they be disappointed. I would*

wish for more people who dreamed boldly and trusted their powers of resilience to see them through inevitable disappointments.

Kushner is wise, but I think he misses one possibility for working with disappointment. There are times when we should look at our expectations, and manage them. Sometimes we set ourselves up for needless disappointment. In his book Kushner identifies five elements of a complete life: family, friends, faith, work, and the satisfaction of making a difference. He then goes on to say: *It is probably unrealistic to expect perfection, not from Moses, not from Einstein, not from ourselves. It is probably too much to expect ourselves or anyone to be equally competent in all five dimensions of the*

complete life. But as a friend of mine likes to say, "You can have it all, just not all at the same time."

Sometimes we need to adjust our expectations a bit. I think this is particularly true in our most intimate relationships. Sometimes we come to expect that our partner will just know what we want or need, and are disappointed when they don't. In the course of a long-term relationship, not everything will always be *wiz, bang, pop*. Sometimes they can be, but not always. We live with the tension of dreaming, caring, hoping, risking, and of having some expectations that are rooted in reality.

I also think that this dynamic matters to the church. I knew a lady at my last church who had left her previous church because her vicar really wasn't

sensitive enough after her father died. Now the person may have been really insensitive and her response appropriate, but it did cause me to think about her expectations. I appreciate the Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. When she holds classes for new members, she speaks last and says: *This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I think it's important to invite them to think about whether they will decide to stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come it and fill the holes left by our community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and real to miss.*

Sometimes we need to manage our expectations, yet we always need to care, to dream, to take some risks if we are to live fully, if we are to follow Jesus faithfully. We will be disappointed along the way. We will disappoint others along the way. Yet, with God's grace and a caring community around us, we can learn and grow. We can understand ourselves better by understanding our disappointments. We will often find that on the other side of disappointment, if we don't allow it to close us off, to shut us down in discouragement, on the other side of disappointment, there are wonderful, and beautiful and unexpected things that happen.

And God goes with us. With God, with one another, disappointment need not mire us in

discouragement, but can lead to unexpected beauty,
wonder, faith and grace. Amen.