

In a Lenten Garden

As I write this, the weather is pretty “gloomy” round these parts and has been for these last few days, and a general sense of “gloom” seems to be one that describes well the mood abroad in the country. The economy remains in the doldrums with no sign of uplift any time soon. Issues of personal morality and more precisely the lack of it dominate the headlines, and sadly the Church is once more rocked by a resignation. We are in need of something to raise our spirits; can the gospel help?

On the face of it you may not think so, as it too seems somewhat gloomy, describing as it does a (grubby?) military incident involving Pilate, his Roman troops and some Galileans, along with the collapse of a (shoddily built?) tower block on top of its unsuspecting occupants. The one, a brutal suppression of what may well have been a justified grievance. The other, a distressing but unforeseen loss of innocent life. All of this is then set against a rather strange parable of a gardener composting his fruit trees. Hmm, what are we to make of it all? The Gospel is of course “Good News” and so we should never read it as if it doesn’t make any sense or that it doesn’t apply to me or to my circumstances. Nor should we feel that its message has no relevance for us even after two thousand years. Of course sometimes it isn’t always easy to fathom, with today’s extract being a case in point, but isn’t it also true that when we do reflect seriously on what Jesus teaches us, a certain truth about ourselves is revealed.

We like to think, probably somewhat ludicrously, that we are on a pathway to endless affluence, only for that path, without rhyme or reasons to crumble inexplicably and collapse like that tower block. Abruptly everything is ruined and we feel cheated and sold short. We look for someone (God?) to take the blame and when we’ve decided to give that someone the elbow, it’s everyone for him/her self, take no prisoners, ask no questions, and let the sword do the talking. Suddenly the events that happen to us and around us become loaded with sentiments and images of callousness and cruelty, insensitivity and harshness. Gone are the noble notions of compassion and tenderness, of mercy and kindness because hard times require hard choices.

It all has that familiar ring of the famous story we’ll read next week, but I wonder if this tendency to strip ourselves of God resonates in another way. We are moving deep into the heart of our Lent. We are now almost without noticing it, into the third week. Is your Lenten garden like mine? A land where the undergrowth can be tough and the weeds clingy and where the allure of freedom and autonomy which the world offers, is laid out before us to pick and choose as we wish. Yet it is precisely here, with these choices before us, that we meet this strange enigmatic gardener, who looks at me and begins to examine my motives. He wants to nurture me, to tend to me and to my needs. He wants to offer me a different choice, another way, a way which offers me a life of compassion and love, of justice and peace as the gateway to freedom and truth. He wants me to convert and to turn to his love, not by avoiding the harsh realities of my life, but by facing up to them and being reconciled and overcoming them. It is a conversion that leads me into another garden. One from where the light of the Risen One will shine forth like the sun dispelling all the gloom.