

# Let grace shape us for compassion

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Lent 2 C: Gen 15.1-12, 17-18; Ps 27; Phil 3.17 – 4.1; Lk 13.1-9

Two days after the Christchurch attack

I thought I had my sermon written early this week. But since the events in Christchurch on Friday, what I wrote is not what we need to think about today. We have seen yet another vicious, hate-filled attack on innocent people, and we need to grieve for them, and to join in solidarity with their families and friends, praying *with* them and *for* them in their agony.

These people were attacked ultimately because of their birth; their birth is who they are, where they come from, and how they worship God; just like us. These people who died and were wounded are the same as us. They're members of our family. They claim the same spiritual ancestry as we do because we too are children of Abraham. And as we heard in the first reading today, Abraham, our common ancestor was also a migrant; someone who'd also travelled to find a new country; just like us or our forebears; just like the victims of Friday's attack.

So the families of the slain who are grieving and shocked – people living a waking nightmare today – these dear people are our kin. And today, as far as is possible at this distance, we cry with these sisters and brothers, we embrace these dear ones; we offer our kin what comfort and love we can.

Friday's horror has an uncanny parallel with a dreadful scene described in our Gospel today. Some people gathered around Jesus and told him of a very similar attack that had happened to a group of his fellow Galileans. These innocent people had

made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship God. But as they were in the very act of worship in the Temple, Pilate had them slaughtered – and in a deed of contemptible cruelty, he had their blood mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. Like the murder done in al-Noor mosque and in Linwood mosque on Friday, it was a ghastly, calculated desecration.

People are reacting to Friday's attack in very different ways – there are even horrible reports of people celebrating the attacks. It's a difficult mindset to imagine.

There's another way people are reacting too. There's a part of human nature that looks for a logical reason for other people's tragedy – not taking pleasure in it, but perhaps looking for a failing in the victim that might explain why they suffer the way they do. People do think this way; it may spring from fear. We may be afraid of the cost to ourselves if we give ourselves over to openhearted compassion.

I imagine this tendency is what Jesus angrily confronts in the people who tell him about the victims of Pilate's desecration. He seems to hear them blaming these poor murdered people for what Pilate did to them. It's as if they're saying God would only let that sort of thing happen in the Temple to very bad people. It's a twisted sort of logic to see someone suffer and opt for an arms-length cause; it must be their fault – because otherwise, we'd have to do something about it. So victims are often unaccountably ostracised; shunned.

To be a victim of any sort of abuse is a terrible thing. But to be shunned or even blamed for what's happened to you is to be abused yet again. It happens to victims of violent assault all over the world – *Dressed like that?! Asking for it!* It's an outrageous attitude and we see Jesus confront it very strongly in today's Gospel. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has shown that we in the Church are as guilty of this attitude as anyone.

So what does God call us to do about it – at a grassroots level? Here?

The Genesis reading today recalls Abraham, our common ancestor, and emphasises the fact that we must look for the kinship there is between us and all God's children. We need reminding that anything that happens to these kin of ours could just as easily happen to us – that there isn't some inherent fault or imperfection in *them* that doesn't exist in *us* – to use us-and-them language. Our Scriptures tell us that choosing compassion instead of *us-and-them* is the responsible reaction.

Do the people telling Jesus the story of the murdered Galileans really mean that God would never let something like that happen to them? That's what Jesus seems to hear. So he says simply that the tragedy they recount could happen to anyone. He underlines the point again with another story of people being killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them. It could happen to anyone – this unexpected death.

So he tells them and us to recognise our common frailty. Don't pre-judge; turn and face God; turn and discover God's grace, and model our own lives on the basis of that grace; respond to that grace by allowing it to shape us for generosity. That means, in the case of last Friday, let that grace shape us for compassion.

In the parable of the fig tree that bears no fruit, Jesus even sets a time limit on this choice to turn to compassion. Remember how the gardener bargained with the owner of the fig tree to give it just one more season to prove it could bear fruit? The fruit Jesus was calling for then is compassion; the vaccination against victim-blaming.

If the Gospel reveals that a basic human reaction to violence and tragedy is the self defence of victim-blaming, then that is a call – a Gospel call to us – to oppose that tendency by

openly choosing to feel and act on compassion; choosing to enter the dangerous space of shared pain; choosing to live as citizens of the costly realm of shared grace. The Gospel call is an invitation to join a counter-insurgency whose mission is not to take life, but to give it; not to mete out blame but compassion.

Let's pray. Dear God, we grieve for our sisters and brothers who were slain and injured as they worshipped on Friday. We pray for their families and friends in this time of shock, of disbelieving horror, of sudden emptiness, and we ask that you hold them close and gather every one of their tears. We pray you protect these kin of ours from thoughtless words and gestures – we pray that they may be surrounded by compassion and healing love. We offer ourselves today as instruments of your healing grace, in the name of Jesus, Lord of Life, Amen.