We are called to bear these three hallmarks; patience, hope and compassion

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Lent 3 C – Lk 13 1-9

In last week's *One Plus One* programme on the ABC, Rosie Batty interviewed Walter Mikac, a man whose wife and children were killed in the Port Arthur massacre. At one point in the interview, he talked about still having a faith in the face of this horror. But he keeps asking: *How could a God who is good allow this to happen to children*?

It's surely a question echoed millions of times right now in Ukraine. And in Australia, every week as more victims of domestic violence and coercive control are killed – *how can a God who is good allow this to happen to children*? it's the big question.

But a friend of mine has reminded me to wonder how poor old God feels about this. Wouldn't God be asking: *How can humanity allow these things to happen to my beloved children? Where on Earth is their compassion?*

There was a rare compassion in Mikac and Batty's interview – two people who had lost children to violent murderers.

When people talk about terrible things happening to others, instead of compassion, sometimes there's an implied undercurrent in what they say. They sound as though they wonder if it there might just be some blame on the victim's side. *What did they do to deserve that?*

Jesus sensed something like that in the people who told him what Pilate did to those poor Galileans. Jesus heard something

in their way of telling that he wanted to challenge – an unspoken message that these poor Galileans may have deserved what they got.

Shouldn't those messengers be protesting against the Roman governor? Very risky. Or supporting the victims' families? Very costly. Instead, it sounds as though they chose to wonder if these people had done something to offend God; to imply in their message that Pilate's victims were being punished by God. Other spiritual teachers taught that sort of thing, so maybe Jesus would too.

It's a cheap, easy way out of compassion, isn't it. You separate yourself from someone's misfortune by casting doubt on them so they won't deserve your compassion. Maybe something like this enables the cruelty that we human beings can perpetrate on each other.

Through the parable of the fig tree, Jesus teaches that it's not just the problem of active cruelty and wrongdoing that concerns God. What worries the God whom Jesus reveals here people's inactivity and procrastination in the face of that wrongdoing. In the parable of the fig tree. This is expressed as a question of fruitfulness.

But before we go into the parable, let me summarise what Jesus has taught in the first part of today's Gospel reading:

- sin is not just evil acts, but also good deeds left on the back burner;
- there's no easy one-to-one link between sin and suffering – karma is a lie;
- Jesus' compassion is not conditional – it's offered to all who suffer.

The parable expounds this. Jesus won't have anyone written off because of their misfortune, but nor will he see anyone written off because they don't bear the fruit of compassion. Those messengers are portrayed as being like the fig tree in

the parable that bore no fruit – bearing empty innuendo instead of the fruits of compassion.

But Jesus doesn't write them off. He calls for patience and mercy. He's the gardener of the parable, setting to work on the messengers, digging around; providing nourishment.

Jesus gives opportunities for growth and fruitfulness again, even where they had already been given and ignored. And when the tree *does* bear fruit, it won't be by its own efforts, but by God's grace; the grace we see expressed by the gardener, Jesus.

If you think about it in terms of a tree, it's perfectly reasonable. If you think about it in terms of responsible adults, that's when we seem to think the parable's a little bit outrageous and permissive.

But that's God for you; the outrageous gardener who prefers diversity to the routine, extravagant over-abundance to mere sufficiency, and who treasures creatures for who they are, and what God-given potential they're capable of, rather than for their achievements.

This means three things for us.

- Don't judge yourself or anyone else as worthy or not; who knows what God might cause to flower?
- And don't be too hasty to give up on a seemingly fruitless venture. God knows, the Church would never have got off the ground if we had.
- And finally, Jesus was calling those messengers from frugal disinterest to generous compassion.

The gospel calls the Church today to bear these three hallmarks; patience, hope and compassion. That's a call to all of us. What a gift that can be to a humanity starving for those fruits.

Amen.