

On September 13, 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of the Reverend Billy Graham, appeared on national television in the USA. She was interviewed, and asked “I've heard people say, those who are religious, those who are not, if God is good, how could God let this happen? To that, [what] you say?”

Anne Graham Lotz replied “I say God is also angry when he sees something like this. I would say also for several years now Americans in a sense have shaken their fist at God and said, God, we want you out of our schools, our government, our business, we want you out of our marketplace. And God, who is a gentleman, has just quietly backed out of our national and political life, our public life. Removing his hand of blessing and protection. We need to turn to God first of all and say, God, we're sorry we have treated you this way and we invite you now to come into our national life. We put our trust in you. We have our trust in God on our coins, we need to practice it.”

The transcript of her answer, and various paraphrases of it, were circulated widely in the following days and weeks. What she said in her answer resonated with many people around the world.

Was it God abandoning the US? Was it God judging the US? Why does God allow people to die like that? How can a good and loving God allow bad things to happen to people? People – non-Christians and Christians alike, often ask that question. It's one of the first things we think of when catastrophes happen, especially when they happen to us, or to people we know.

How can God just stand by and watch as hundreds and thousands of people are killed by natural disasters? And thousands on thousands more by war? Where is God in all that suffering?

If God is really in charge, and he lets terrible things happen to people, the logical explanation must be that they somehow deserved it. God must be punishing us for something we've done when bad things happen, right?

It's okay to ask questions like these. Faithful people, people who have trusted in God their entire lives, continue to ask questions like these.

We were reminded last week that Jesus had resolutely set out for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), and today's gospel reading comes from that time, a stop on a journey that will take him to Jerusalem and to the cross. During this stop on the journey, Jesus was sharing dinner at Pharisee's house. Jesus spoke – at length – to those gathered... and his words are for us today.

Now there were some present at [the dinner] who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?” (13:1-2)

Other than the trial of Jesus, this, and brief mentions at the opening of Luke's gospel and after Jesus' death, are the only mentions of Pilate in the gospels, and we know

nothing else of this 'mixing of the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices'. The Jewish historian Josephus relates a similar instance, though: Jews of Caesarea (most of whom would be Galileans) confronted Pilate because he'd brought Roman ensigns of Caesar to Jerusalem. Following that, and Pilate responded brutally.

Jesus challenges his listeners, asking "Do you think what happened to them is because they were sinners?" and the answer is "I tell you, no!" because they were doing the right thing – making the correct sacrifices.

And his second challenge is "...those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Unlike Pilate's killing of the Galileans, this was a natural disaster – or perhaps an engineering disaster. Was it God's judgement? Again, the answer is "I tell you, no!"

It seems there was a belief at that time, as there sometimes is today, that severe calamities happened only to people who deserved God's judgment and that the truly righteous would be spared suffering. Jesus said that was not true.

In John's gospel, we read the story of the man born blind which makes a similar point: As he went along, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him". (John 9:1-3)

Bad things happen all the time. Terrible things. Tragic things. Unfair things.

Terrible things have happened to people throughout history, like having a tower fall on you, or your home destroyed by floods or bushfires, or having a loved one struck down in a car accident, or receiving a cancer diagnosis. We can be torn by saying "Why does God let this happen?" and "This must be our fault".

After all, if we blame God, it takes the responsibility off us. If we are keep asking "Why did God let this happen?", it's God's fault, and we don't have to do anything.

And if we say "This must be our fault," we almost put ourselves in charge – higher than God. We could change what we do to make everything right. We could earn God's favour – and God's forgiveness.

The Lutheran professor and author David Lose writes, "These events – whether in the first or twenty-first century – aren't ultimately about guilt or punishment [...]. They are just events, some of which we can't do much about, while others we can, but what remains is that no amount of discussing or debating ... helps us get about the things we *can* influence." When bad things happen, it's a wake-up call to repent, to turn our eyes *toward* Jesus.

Which is what Jesus says next – immediately after his second "I tell you, no!" he says, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Repentance is a major theme of the season of Lent. We talk about repentance as an act of turning completely around, to leave our sin behind us. Turning away from sin, and turning to Jesus.

People often take 'repentance' as being sorry for our sin, but repentance is much more than being sorry: While we should be sorry for what we've done wrong, we also need to change. There's the saying "An apology without change is just manipulation," and I'm sure we're all familiar with apologies that are little more than excuses, and apologies which avoid responsibility ("I'm sorry if I hurt you", "I'm sorry if you were offended.", "I'm sorry, but I was drunk or upset or whatever it might be.") True repentance requires acceptance of responsibility, and true repentance requires changing.

There is more to repentance than just changing our behaviour, though. We have to do things differently, and we have to turn away from sin, yes... but what are we going to do instead?

We need to turn away from our wrongdoing and turn to Jesus. Rather than focusing on what's bad, and avoiding it, we need to focus on what's right. Otherwise, we can just get preoccupied with what's wrong and trying to obey rule after rule to avoid breaking them.

Instead blaming God and God's wrath for all the bad things that happen to us, and instead of claiming responsibility for ourselves, or thinking of repentance as some sort of self-help program to improve our behaviour, we need to turn to – and follow – Jesus. Our repentance needs to become a deep desire to listen to him, especially when we find ourselves in the middle of a catastrophe.

Jesus says it clearly, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

When Jesus says, "Unless you repent you will die as they did," he doesn't mean a tower is going to fall on you. Your blood is not going to be mixed with some animal's sacrificial blood.

Jesus was saying that the deaths he was talking about weren't judgements, but they were tragedies. The deaths were pointless. Unless you repent, in other words, your life will be as pointless as their deaths were. If you want your life to have a point, if you want your life to have a clear purpose, repentance is the key.

When think of repentance as turning toward Jesus, rather than simply being sorry, or just changing our behaviour, we can better grasp God's grace, and better reflect that grace in our lives. When we repent, we turn to God, not because it will earn us God's favour, but we repent because of what God has done for us.

Jesus tells his listeners that there is urgency involved. Any of them could be struck down by a tyrant or by an accident at any moment. "Unless you repent you will die as they did." Of course, repentance doesn't protect us from physical harm, but when we are right with God, when we are following Jesus, then our future, our everlasting future is assured.

Our reading today from the book of Isaiah reflects this urgency, as it also calls us to repentance:

⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call on him while he is near. When is that? Well, it's now, and it's always. Jesus promised that he would be with us always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

While there's life in us, there's hope. God is patient and kind. God is compassionate.

God doesn't send judgements of terrorism or natural disaster upon people who displease him. But neither is God a dispassionate observer through the tragedies we experience. So often, we see the love of God expressed through people in the aftermath of tragedies, people reaching out to help and comfort those who are suffering or mourning.

In Jesus, God became one of us, he experienced all the things of human life. He was no detached observer. Instead, he travelled with people, we wept with people, and he grieved with people. And Jesus helped people up from where they were. He led people from the darkness of despair into the light of hope.

And I think that's reflected very much in the next part of what Jesus said to the people gathered at the Pharisee's house for that dinner.

He told them, as he often did, a parable: A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil? (13:6-7)

People are often like the owner of the fig tree. A fig tree that produces no fruit is useless. People see unproductive things around them and want to get rid of them. They're impatient. It's so easy to think that people suffering deserve it – lung cancer? Must have been a smoker. Poverty? Laziness, or maybe gambling. Homelessness? Alcohol or drugs. People – us - are so often the ones who want to write people off, to cut down the fig tree.

But not so the caretaker – the gardener – who has tended this tree for years. “Leave it alone for one more year,” he pleads, “and I'll dig around it and fertilize it.”

Give it another chance. And not only give it another chance, but “I'll help it”, he says.

And that's the story of God and God's people. They kept drifting away from God, but God kept bringing them back, with the judges, the prophets, and ultimately with Jesus.

Sometimes we are like the owner of that fig tree. We judge people by their circumstances, we blame victims for their suffering, we write people off.

We shouldn't be blaming. But we should also not be dispassionate observers. We should help where we can, make the difference we can. Not because it's our fault that there was a catastrophe (whether a personal one or a national one), but because we should care. We should be like the gardener of the parable.

Of course, we will still struggle with the problem of suffering. Of course, we will still fall into judgmental attitudes and impatience and victim-blaming. And God will continue to work on us, like that gardener with the fig tree. We are far from perfect. But that's not an obstacle in our relationship with God. Jesus calls us to follow him – to repent and turn to him – from wherever we might be. As Jesus said, “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

As people around the world continue to face tragedy and suffering, they will continue to ask, “Where is God?” and there is no simple answer to that. Tragedies are not God's judgement, but neither does God not care about people who are suffering.

As people face tragedies, the question for those of us who follow Jesus, should be “Where are we?”

As we travel through Lent, we live in the shadow of the cross. We should always be looking to Jesus – Jesus who lived and died and rose again for us – and not just us here, but all people everywhere.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Amen