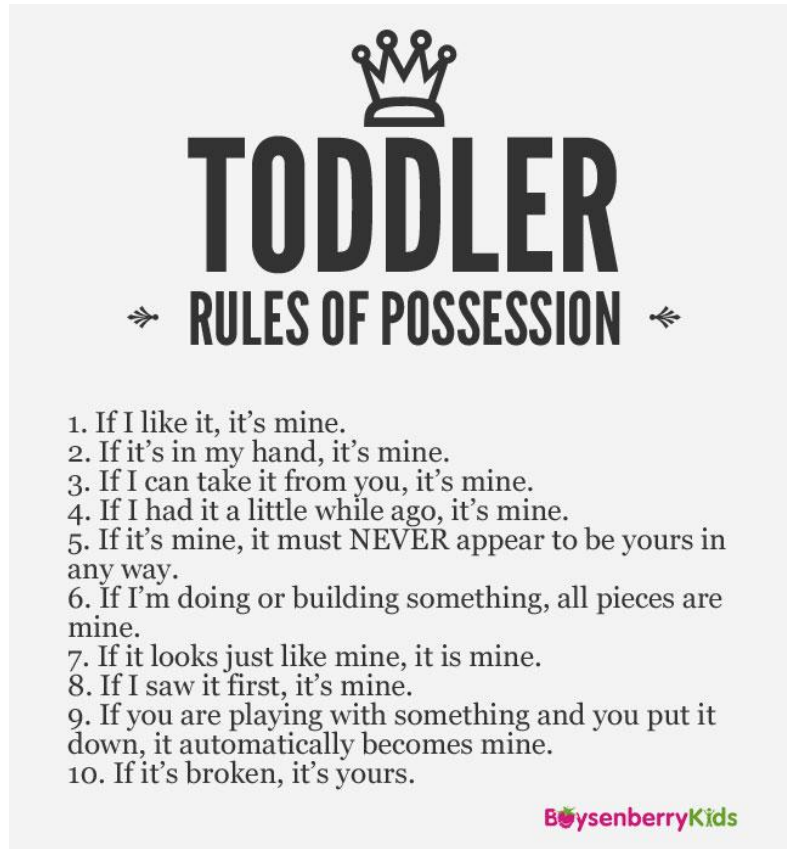


Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church, Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Geoff Read on Sunday 23rd March 2025

Bible texts: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

Having spent last weekend with my toddler grandson, the Toddler Rules of Possession came to mind



At 4 its lovely to see our granddaughter is starting to move from this naturally egotistical position as she becomes aware of the needs of others

From our earliest years there is a sense of fairness inbuilt to human nature rooted in cause and effect – if we do this, that will follow, so how about trying this instead

Our gospel reading is rooted in two major news story of the Jesus' day. Both are about cause and effect and how we make sense of evil and tragedy, justice and judgement

We can only guess at the actual circumstances from how each is recorded – Pilate the Roman governor has executed people from Galilee and there is also something about the circumstances that found them either engaged in religious sacrifices at the time or their blood was mixed with temple sacrifices, a desecration of the Jewish temple and its worship

Then what about those killed by natural disaster or even shoddy workmanship – eighteen killed when a tower collapsed in Siloam?

Like in a cartoon, Jesus turns his dps thought bubbles into a speech bubble, speaking out loud the gossip and speculation among the disciples and more widely too

Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?... 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? (v2, 4)

In other words: why do these people suffer as they do?

Are they punished by what happens to them for their wrongdoing – not just by Pilate, but somehow in the way the universe works, or even how Jewish religion was thought to work in Jesus’ day?

Jesus doesn’t deny the cause and effect of the natural and moral ordering of the world

Or even the tragic way that innocent people suffer as bystanders to the deliberate acts of others

What he does do is slide in another dimension in the word “repent” both times

No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. (vv 3 & 5)

He then goes on to grow that thought with a parable about a fig tree that isn’t doing what it is meant to do – bear figs

The owner declares it a waste of space or soil

But the gardener says wait: create possibility (dig and fertilise) and see what then happens – the possibility of judgment remains – if it bears fruit next year, well and good. If not, you can cut it down

And its this More, this added possibility that moves us from the idea of contract to covenant

Contract is rooted in the thinking of simple cause and effect, “tit-for-tat” – if you do this, that will happen, or if you do this I will do that

Covenant is different – the focus is not on outcomes but on relationship

In Covenant behaviour still has consequences but it’s about the impact it has on the relationship rather than just the circumstances or outcomes

Which routes us back to our first reading, from the OT

Here the prophet Isaiah is speaking poetically about the nature of covenant, the basis on which God called His people, the Jews, into relationship with Him, to be a chosen people

Chosen for an experience of His love in a particular way, almost like a prototype for the whole of humanity, to explicitly experience God’s love and respond to it by living lives of holiness and love – loving the Lord their God with all they are and their neighbour as themselves

And here’s the paradox – read the start of Chapter 55 with me – Isaiah speaks words from God to His people Israel:

“Come everyone – if you are hungry or thirsty buy what you need without money and without price ...”

Did you notice the paradox of buying but without money – still there is a price, an interaction of a particular sort that isn’t charity – but somehow you can now do that without money

What’s that about?

It’s not explained.

Instead, its left hanging – giving value to what is received, but leaving us with a question, new possibilities, as to how that happens

One the one hand we recognise the way that actions have consequences – things of value cost - but we are also left wondering how this can happen – God’s invitation is to you that have no money, come buy and eat

The invitation goes on: *Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live (v3)*

And then comes the word: “covenant” (v3b)

It’s the calling into relationship with God, opening ourselves to His seemingly impossible possibilities

It’s the calling out of the previous way of simple cause & effect thinking

And the call to do so not just for your own benefit, Israel, but for the benefit of others too – this is the original calling of Israel – to be a light to the nations, so attractive in lifestyle that other nations will run to them (v5a)

Why?

Because God has “glorified” them (v5b) – His relationship, His presence, has been welcomed, received, acted upon, obeyed so that they themselves are transformed and invite others to the same

That is not automatic – covenant is invitation, conditional, hence the call in v6ff

*Seek the Lord ... let the wicked forsake their ways ... return **so that** ... He can have mercy on them, abundantly pardon (v7b)*

When Isaiah spoke, it was to a Jewish people in Exile in Babylon, living the consequences of disobedience

Yes, the natural, the ethical consequences of being on the losing side of the gambles and mis-alliances of the geopolitics of their day

But also More, the prophets says: living the covenant consequences of turning their backs on God

Now that prophet speaks of the even More of covenant as the possibility of mercy, of coming back home

This is the amazing added value of covenant rather than contract – the More of God’s mercy and grace in vv7-8

*Let the wicked forsake their way
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

When Jesus speaks, it is into this Jewish worldview – hence the word “repent”, a covenant word – which means to turn around, a change of mind, to return – responding to the possibility of, in his parable, fruitfulness

And remember: both Isaiah and Jesus are speaking to the people and places that we now call Israel and Palestine

The great preacher John Stott says we as Christians are called to “double listening” – engaging with life with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other

So as we read these passages we surely can't help but also listen to the news and see all that is going on again in and between Palestine and Israel as the Israeli defence force once more bomb and enter Gaza

As we read of the deaths of again especially women and children we have to ask with the disciples: why do these people suffer as they do?

In a [statement](#) on Thursday, the Archbishop of York described the bombings of Gaza by the IDF as a *“devastating and reckless blow ... a callous and unnecessary act of violence which showed scant regard for the sacredness of human life or the principles of international humanitarian law.*

“This offensive must end, and it must end now. It is imperative that the ceasefire agreement be respected by all sides, unimpeded humanitarian assistance be re-established and the remaining hostages released immediately.”

I agree. And I hope you do too.

But where is the path to lasting and mutual justice and peace for all that is so much more than simply a ceasefire, important and vital as that is now?

According to Isaiah and to Jesus, it's through seeing life, seeing each other and seeing God not just through simple hardnosed cause and effect, the “tit -for-tat” of contract, but the richness and relationship and More of covenant

*Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;*

*⁷ let the wicked forsake their way
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

*⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*