

St Chad's Church, Ladybarn.

Canon Albert Radcliffe.

3rd March 2013.

The Third Sunday of Lent.

Were they worse sinners than all other Galileans [Luke 13:2]

Jesus asked them: *Were they worse sinners than all other Galileans?*

The best teachers in our school were not those who explained something to you, but those who asked you to explain something back to them, because then they could tell you whether you'd understood it or not.

Congregations are like that. They can tell whether or not the preacher has made any sense of the lesson.

If you like puzzles, you'll like this morning's gospel. It's about making sense of making sense.

When I worked for Union Carbide as a very junior chemist, our senior chemist was conducting an experiment to discover why a certain process in the manufacture of cosmetics was going wrong.

It didn't make sense and it was an experiment to find out why.

He was using something that might make sense, to make sense of something that didn't make sense – a bit like today's gospel.

Just as I popped my head in the fume cupboard his experiment began to go wrong and his distillate began to creep back up the condenser tube.

He panicked and was hunched with his head in his hands.

Having faced a similar problem in my garden shed as a 14 year old attempting to distil whiskey, I simply turned off a tap and saved the experiment.

As a result, I was treated to dinner by him and his wife.

Making sense of one thing to make sense of another is how understanding grows.

We human beings are only happy when things make sense. When they don't, we suffer what psychologists call *cognitive dissonance* and to end this painful agitation of mind we ask questions.

The most common of all these dissonance-provoking questions is the one Jesus was asked: 'Why do bad things happen to good people.'

As the new curate at Knotty Ash, my Vicar sent me to visit the maternity Unit at Alder Hey Hospital. A young mother had given birth to a baby with a cleft palate.

'Why has this happened to me?' She asked. If I'd told her it was a genetic malfunction, it wouldn't have helped.

Her next question was, 'What have I done to deserve this? And after that, 'Is God punishing me?'

'So why do bad things happen to good people?'

As curate I was in the same position as our Lord as a prophet. Everyone in Jerusalem was talking about a tower that had collapsed killing 18 God-fearing, Torah observant Jews. Why?

Was it because they were worse sinners than those on whom nothing had fallen? That might make sense of a meaningless event.

When children do something wrong they are punished. Like me, being sent to the bottom of the class for talking – again!

Those of us who remembered teachers saying, 'This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you', know how guilt, punishment and pain go together in a young mind.

And so, when we are older and suffer misfortune we become vulnerable. We regress and become childlike again, thinking 'It must be a punishment for something I've done.'

Prophets like Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel had told the Jewish people that their exile in Babylon had been a punishment for idolatry. So what was a tower falling on people a punishment for?

When they asked Jesus, he said, 'No. It was a not a punishment. They were not worse sinners than anyone else.'

'After all', he might have added, 'Remember Job. He was a good man and look what happened to him.'

Jesus had answered their question, but he hadn't solved their problem. Undeserved suffering was then, and still is now, suffering without meaning.

And, then there followed a '*hanging but*.' 'But,' Jesus says, 'unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

Now, how does that make sense of anything? What could they repent of? How does this morning's gospel make sense of making sense.

How does one saying that we struggle to understand, shed light on another whose meaning is not obvious either. What's Jesus getting at?

The clue is in that 'hanging but'. 'But, unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.'

That 'but' contrasts death by a falling tower that no one could have predicted, with another threat of death that was predictable, though Jesus fellow Jews were ignoring it.

This was the death of tens of thousands of Jews who were ready to turn their religion into a political revolt against Rome.

These Jewish nationalists, who, in the gospel are called *Zealots*, believed that a military Messiah would lead them to victory and as a result God would grant them national independence. Some even thought that Jesus was that Messiah.

No one could have anticipated the tower's collapse. But now, Jesus said, unless they changed their minds about rebelling, they'd perish as surely as the undeserving had.'

In short, it was not a falling tower that they had to worry about, but, an empire falling on them. The falling tower was what we call 'a Spiritual Distraction.'

And just as they didn't listen to Jesus' message about the kingdom or Empire of God, so they would not listen to his warning about the Roman Empire falling on them.

In the end, Jesus would die, killed by his own prophecy, because, in crucifying him, the Romans believed they were defending their empire against rebellion.

So, to make sense of the tower collapsing on the innocent we need to make prior sense of the political background that would take Jesus to the cross.

If you don't know the story, in 66AD the Zealots did rebel against Rome.

They held out against all the odds for four years; after which Jerusalem was destroyed and hundreds of thousands of innocent Jews died.

They were even foolish enough to try again 60 years later, with the result that the Holy Land was all but emptied of Jews until the modern state of Israel was declared in 1948, and the tragic story of bad things happening to innocent people started all over again.

Now, traditionally, sermons consist of two main parts; the Exegesis, or explanation, and the Exposition or application of that explanation.

Our making sense of Jesus making sense, and his being crushed by the Roman Empire for his message, is the Exegesis or Explanation of our gospel reading.

But sermons which explain texts without applying those texts to our lives are not sermons but lectures. So how do we apply a difficult passage like this to our circumstances at St Chad's?

While they were questioning Jesus about a collapsing tower, a far greater threat was taking shape all around them and they were ignoring it.

So in expounding our text we have to ask, What threats are St Chad's, the diocese of Manchester and the whole Church of England ignoring while we busy ourselves with less important things. .

This is the question that troubles me in my retirement. It's a question too for the new Archbishop of Canterbury; for the next Bishop of Manchester, for Elizabeth, our parish priest and for Professor Scott on his placement at St Nicholas, Burnage.

The 2011 census show that there are 4 million fewer Christians in England than in 2001. In other words, we've lost 400,000 a year. What plans have we for getting them back?

In addition, 25% of Britons say they have no religion. In Norwich it's 42%; and Norwich is a city full of churches.

Oughtn't we be discussing this and planning to do something about it. If the gospel is to have any application in our lives, surely we must expound it here.

Jesus was hinting that the whole Jewish nation had become a toppling tower. Census returns show that, for us, it's us, an entire Christian people.

Does this worry us? If it does. And it should do, what can we do about it?

In Junior School, we used to have spelling tests. 'Spell *beautiful*,' Miss Dobells said. My hand shot up.

'Now spell *procrastination*.' My hand shot down.

The whole class looked puzzled. We were an all boy's class and procrastination was a fault, it seemed, especially common among young

boys. I discovered it was putting off until tomorrow what we should be doing today.

It was, Miss said, a good job that Mr Churchill did not procrastinate, because then we'd never defeat Mr Hitler.

The word came up again six years later in Confirmation Class, where this time it we discovered it might even be a sin! Were we saying our prayers? our Vicar, Mr Penley asked.

Or putting them off. Were we examining our hearts and consciences according to the Ten Commandments. Had we learnt the Ten Commandments?

More importantly, were we keeping them. 'Yes we are,' we all said.'

Or were we putting such things off until tomorrow. I could spell 'procrastination.' And I knew what it meant, but was I avoiding doing something about it? I was I putting off tackling procrastination to another day.

A bit like those Galileans discussing the Tower of Siloam who were ignoring the far greater threat so they could to discuss a lesser one.

There are about 1,000 children in our parish, and we've had to close our Sunday School. There are hundreds of students too, but few ever come to St Chad's, or to any other parish I've taken services at.

Tackling this lack of young people in most of our parishes is one of the Church of England's sins of procrastination.

It's a tower waiting to fall on every parish in England. Today's gospel is not easy to understand, and even harder to put into practice.