

Sunday, March 3, 2013: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

by [James Alison](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue

It seems counterintuitive, but Lent is all about abundance. When we focus on a time of renunciation and discipline, these are not ends in themselves, but the conditions necessary for the enrichment of our imagination.

Almost nothing is more difficult for us to imagine than something coming from nothing. Yet that is the signature of the presence of God, the Creator of all things. For God it is no problem to create something out of nothing. For God, scarcity, which is easier for us to imagine than abundance, is absurd. God's self-depiction through the prophet Isaiah confounds any expectation of calculus: come, buy food, eat, get wine and drink, but without money or price. How on earth can one buy without money or price? God is desperate to show us a generosity that makes a mockery of our smallness of mind and our conviction of the difficulty of getting things that we want and need.

When we recall Isaiah's phrase about God's ways not being our ways and God's thoughts not our thoughts, it is usually to conjure up bafflement at a mystifying distance. This is exactly the reverse of what Isaiah says. What is it that is so different about God's ways? God's ways are hugely abundant, generous and *for us*, while wickedness and a fear of our imaginations continuously hold us back. It is difficult for us to imagine that God is near us and has a plan to glorify us. It is easy to be moralistic about "ways of wickedness" and "thoughts of unrighteousness"; it is much harder for us to glimpse that "thoughts of righteousness" rest on a huge abundance of generosity and mercy, and that our tendency to close down frontiers and create security by contrasting ourselves with feared or impure "others" is a well-trodden path of wickedness that we leave only by daring to be open to what is new.

Paul tells the Corinthians the same thing: the people of Israel, as shown in the book of Numbers, offer a textbook example of desire gone wrong, of imagination starved of goodness, which then turns to idolatry. First we have the golden calf; then "playing the harlot with the daughters of Moab" (Num. 25:1, NASB); then testing God, as at Massah. Throughout we have continuous complaining and a pining for Egypt. These are the patterns of desire in which God's pleasure does *not* dwell,

patterns of desire which cannot share in God's delight. The One who was trying to give them more kept finding that they were addicted to less. Once again, as we saw in our readings for the first Sunday of Lent, only the imagination, which is fixed on the abundance and generosity of giving, is empowered to stretch beyond itself and avoid foreclosing and settling for too little. Hence we have an attention to endurance and a refusal to see God as simply testing. What the abundance held out before us does is train us to grow.

Jesus faces the same problems of imagination in his listeners. They are idolatrously reassured by linking disasters with God's will and issues of morality. This thinking enables stagnation and a refusal to search for the real causes of such things. Unless we change our minds and hearts (that is what *repent* means), our desire and imagination, then we will remain within exactly the same enclosed world as those comforted by its deathly familiarity. Jesus has a horror of the ease with which we sacralize violence. How to get us out of it? By throwing a curveball at our imagination.

Step one: get people to identify God with a master coming to visit a fig tree in a vineyard—Isaiah and Joel help him to start with a familiar image. Step two: have the master do something utterly against Leviticus 25 and the law of *orlah* by demanding a harvest of fruit during the first three years. According to law, no fruit can be harvested for three years; even in the fourth year only first fruits, not profits, are available.

The master who wishes to foreclose the entire operation by cutting down the tree cannot be God, although our terrified imaginations think of God as the one foreclosing. In fact, foreclosing is directly against God's law—and thus God's imagination.

Step three: perhaps our imaginations can be nudged toward thinking of God as the gardener who begs the master to repent, to change his mind and heart and cease to foreclose. Then the gardener, not ashamed of getting his hands dirty with dung, can perhaps nudge the tree into producing the first fruits in the fourth year.

Step four: hint at Joel. Joel 1:12 tells of a barren fig tree and a demand for the people's repentance. But in Joel 2:22, the fig tree gives its full yield. What God wants all along is for people to receive abundance, and he begs us to allow him to train our imaginations away from fear, scarcity and the violence that is their sacred mantle.