

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 20th March 2022.*

*Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9*

### ***The Fig Tree***

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I am sure we will all have had the war with Ukraine in our sights all week, but unlike Geoff, I am not going to attempt to preach on it; Geoff, thank you for those thoughts you shared with us last week. I'll not preach on it but I **will** use it as my opener: if ever we needed an example of undeserved calamity, and unprovoked slaughter and suffering, surely this is it, for us today. Are the Ukrainians greater sinners or greater offenders than the rest of us, that this has happened to them? The response is, of course, a resounding NO! The very thought is an offense to our sense of compassion.

Jesus asks the same question, on hearing news of a contemporary outrage: a group of Galileans who were slaughtered without reason in the temple, by Pilate. And a second: a tower on the city wall that collapsed and killed eighteen people who happened to be passing by. Were those killed in those calamities greater sinners or offenders than those that avoided getting hit? Without waiting for them to answer, he gives them that same resounding "No!"

"No!", because God does **not** make bad things happen to people as a punishment, that is an erroneous way of thinking. It is inconsistent with a faithful, loving, merciful God.

But God gave us free-will, which risks evil happening as well as good. Evil things are done. And natural disasters happen, as well as man-made disasters. To be a victim demonstrates nothing about a person's just deserts, of course it doesn't. Yet we frequently hear people puzzling over questions like, 'How could such bad things happen to such good people?'

'Why did God allow that?'

He doesn't; it just does: bad things happen.

But even so, we can be sure that our ever-present, faithful God **is** always there, even if its not apparent. He is always moving ahead to hold and heal, and bring good out of evil. Light overcoming dark; new and stronger growth in time.

Jesus, talking to the crowds in this passage from Luke, does not brush aside the awfulness of those tragedies but uses them as a **measure** of the coming tragedy that these people are not paying attention to. That is, the tragedy of not knowing God. Not recognising God even though they are witnessing God at work in front of them, in the person of Jesus. He needs them to listen and learn who God is, while he is still with them, so they will believe when he is risen. So others will believe down the centuries. So we can believe.

The urgency was not just for then, for those people. Those words of Jesus' are for us, too.

The value of what is on offer is priceless for us.

It is without price, as Isaiah puts it.

It is the knowledge that we are deeply loved when the world hates us.

It is the hope that holds us and gives strength in adversity. That holds us in everlasting arms.

The words of Isaiah are directed at the people of Israel, in **preparation** for Jesus' coming, promising the new covenant that will come through the line of David. 'Come!', he says, 'Come, and receive the water that satisfies (the living water that Jesus will offer the Samaritan woman). You don't need money to receive the priceless rich food: the milk, bread and wine that is God feeding us: feeding us to build us up in faith. You don't need money, the only resource you need is the desire for God, the desire to seek him.

We need to desire to seek him in good times and in bad; perhaps especially, in the neither good nor bad times of boredom and complacency.

Jesus, talking to the crowds in this passage from Luke, wants to help them understand what it might look like to desire to seek God in this way. What a peculiar illustration Jesus hit on for this, in telling the parable of the fig tree. How can that picture fit?

As we know, parables work on many layers, they tell many different perspectives of the same truth, and when we think we have heard it, they always have more to offer. I will offer you three thoughts, the first two are the result of consulting a commentary which pointed me to Leviticus.

In Leviticus 19, Moses receives the instruction: "*When you come into the land of Canaan and plant any kind of fruit tree, consider the fruit ritually unclean for the first three years. During that time you must not eat it. In the fourth year all the fruit shall be dedicated as an **offering** to show your **gratitude** to me, the Lord. But in the fifth year you may eat the fruit.*"

Let's first look at this from the man's point of view: He had this fig tree planted three years ago, and has so far seen nothing.

Now, in its fourth year he has given up on it, impatient for a return on his investment. Wanting to have what is not his: this is the year it is given to the Lord. The gardener, rightly, asks him to wait another year. To stay the pattern and expect the yield in the fifth year.

It takes time and persistence to grow in our relationship with God, and it requires us to give and be generous first. He is wanting to cut out the year of gratitude, cut out learning that all we have is God-given and gift.

Second, let's look at this from God's point of view.

The story tell us the tree is planted in the man's **vineyard**.

In biblical imagery, God gets represented as the land owner, and the vineyard is his people. This story is about God's relationship with his people. God is expecting and waiting for his people to rejoice with him, to turn to him and give him back some of all the love he has shown them. This is the moment they should be in joyous relationship with him. And they fail to bother. Should he give up on them? Will he give up on us?

No. He is persuaded to show restraint, to hold back another year and to invest yet more in these people. Not just to give them one more chance but to give them the best chance he can.

That is how God is with us, his people. His loving patience will extend to giving us one more chance, with all the help he can, because he longs for us to turn back to him and for us to work from that place of gratitude.

Third, let's look at this from the gardener's point of view.

The gardener knows his trees inside out, he knows, nurtures and watches over every one of them. Nobody knows better than he what this tree needs, and what its potential for fruiting is, if only it has time and the right conditions to achieve that potential. He defends the tree when it is under threat, he saves it from being chopped down, and personally sees it is instead, able to be built up. He speaks out for the tree, and promises on behalf of it, that there should be another chance, and lavishes his loving attentions to maximise that chance.

I wonder who the good gardener is? I wonder why he should love me so much? I wonder why he puts his life's work on the line for me to be saved?

When I once considered planting a fig tree I learnt that they will grow very big with huge long shoots, and very leafy but not necessarily produce much fruit unless the roots are confined. The recommendation was to confine the root growth a bit by planting them in a lined pit. Now, I am no gardener, but I was reminded of this when I read this parable, and wondered if the trench that the gardener digs around the tree is to stop it from producing just luxuriant growth, and instead, to stimulate the fruits.

Lent is the time for growing more purposefully towards producing the fruits of faith. And we do that best by checking ourselves when we shoot out in directions that are not towards God, and checking ourselves when we forget to be grateful to God.

So lets pray:

*Merciful and long-suffering God, skilled and loving gardener of our souls, give us the desire to use the manure of your spirit, that we may live and fruit with you, and for you, always. Amen*