



Sunday 17 March 2019 - Lent 2 Year C

Christ Church Cathedral, Grafton (Confirmation Service)

In the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:1-9), the question was asked ...

Why should (the tree) be wasting the soil? He (The gardener) replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

We all get stuck in a rut sometimes. Maybe we're coasting along in our comfort zones, doing what we feel safe doing, doing what's expected, what we've always done.

On Facebook you often see posts about what people would (if they had the opportunity) say now to that High School or Primary School teacher who really had a positive impact on them.

What would we say to that teacher who had ..

- seen our potential
- pulled us up
- challenged us
- drew something better out of us
- Someone who had pulled us out of a rut?

Maybe for you it wasn't a teacher at all, it was a colleague, boss or friend.

For me it was my Year 10 English teacher. I feel sorry for her. After almost a year of reading my pretty-average English essays that were poorly researched and sloppily put together, she must have had enough. Maybe she already knew she was going to have me for Years 11-12 English also and couldn't contemplate another 2 years of it!

She took me aside one day and basically said "if you don't wake up to yourself and start putting some effort in, you're going to waste your whole life" (not her exact words but pretty close. She was blunt).

That was a shock to my system, but I didn't deny it because I knew it was true, I knew I was just coasting along. It woke me up and I pretty soon changed my ways.

Instead of getting by on minimal effort I started operating outside my comfort zone and put in some real effort. I got straight HDs for English for the whole of Years 11-12.

That teacher was a bit like the gardener. She was patient, but did what was needed to shock, stimulate and challenge the tree into new life and the reaching of potential.

For more on the Parable from today's Gospel read the material from LifeOnDoverBeach.wordpress.com below.

Jesus told the story not because he thought we needed gardening advice - how to care for fruit-bearing trees, but because he knew that what was true for the *tree* is true also for *us*: God expects that there will be fruit in our lives.

To bear fruit, to reach our potential in him, we need to be challenged, stimulated and nurtured.

We need to believe in God's promise for us.

In our OT reading God told Abram to look to the heavens and count the stars. God's dream for him was far greater than he had previously imagined, perhaps even greater than he could conceive. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann¹ writes that "... hearers of the promise become incongruous with the reality around them, as they strike out in hope to the promised new future".

We might not recognise the promise or we might even reject it, but the promise remains and can be relied on (Lev 26:44-45). It is always there for believers to cling to, and God, like the gardener, is always at work to fulfil the promise.

God's promises for us are abundant, like the stars in the sky. In God, and under God's promise, the fig tree has the potential to bear fruit.

So as you navigate this turning point, this rite of passage, that we call the Sacrament of Confirmation, may you really think about the direction of your life, your potential; how you are responding to God's promise for you.

What gifts has God given you, how might you be nurtured by the Word of God and by the community of faith here to grow (as the tree was nurtured by the gardener)?

How you might use your gifts to the best of your ability to fully become the person that God has created you to be?

Dr Murray Harvey

Notes.

1. Jurgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope. London SCM, 1967

Extra Material for Further Reading

Source: <https://lifeondoverbeach.wordpress.com/2011/03/24/the-barren-fig-tree/>

It seems from today's gospel reading that people haven't changed all that much over the two thousand years since the death and resurrection of Jesus. People, then, as now, avidly discussed the latest news of tragedy, death and destruction and tried to understand its significance.

We don't know precisely what tragedy some people told Jesus about on the day that our reading originally took place, all we know for sure is that several Galileans were killed in or near the temple by Pilate's soldiers as they prepared to offer their sacrifices to God. Nor do we have a record of the tragedy involving the collapse of the tower in Siloam that killed eighteen people. All we know for sure is that then, as now, tragedy struck and people died and still other people talked about it, and tried to make sense of it. Whenever bad things happen, whenever senseless things happen, the human instinct is to try to make sense of it. We all want to make sense of the senseless, we want to know why certain things occur, and that is often a good thing. For example – when buildings collapse, like the tower in Siloam collapsed, investigations are done to find out why so that, just perhaps, such a tragedy will not occur again. Generally speaking wanting to know why is not a bad thing, but sometimes the urge to figure out why leads us astray, it leads us into assigning blame and guilt to people that do not deserve it, or who at least do not deserve it any more or less than do we.

Several years ago when the AIDS epidemic was just becoming recognized, people tried to understand what it meant. People, talking about the problem, sometimes said things like: "Well, it's a punishment from God", or, "if they hadn't engaged in that behavior they wouldn't have gotten it." and "People who do that deserve everything that happens to them." Some people, in their quest to understand, revealed all the compassion and sensitivity of an ash tray. The implication was that we didn't need to be all that concerned because the people suffering somehow deserved what had happened to him – just as in today's reading, the implication is made by the people talking about the Galileans killed by Pilate that they somehow they deserved to die. Why else would Jesus have replied, "Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? and What about the eighteen people killed when the tower fell on them in Siloam? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the other people living in Jerusalem. No indeed, and I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did."

There is a way to make sense of the senseless, but that way is not to blame the suffering by suggesting that somehow God brought about their death, or whatever other mishap has occurred to them as some kind of punishment. By that standard no one should be alive today, for all have sinned

and fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus suggests that we make sense of the senseless, not by condemning the victims of tragedy for their complicity in their own deaths – but by considering our own mortality, and our own sinfulness, and working to produce fruit befitting our salvation before we are called to account for our lives before his eternal throne.

The message of Jesus, like the prophets before him, is that all of us deserve to experience the wrath of God, but that God does not seek our deaths, nor does he delight in our suffering, rather he calls us to live by his gracious law, and by the power of his Spirit and the wisdom of his living word, so that we might be able to stand before him at the end as one whose work in this life has been well and truly done.

As the parable of the unfruitful fig tree in verses 6-10 of the above reading tells us that God expects there to be fruit in our lives, He expects us to do that which is pleasing to him, lest we be cut down and perish like those we think have somehow deserved their deaths. That same parable, my friends, tells us that God is in the business of giving us second, third, and indeed even fourth chances, chances to get it straight, and do that which is pleasing to him, but that, when all is said and done, there is a time of reckoning that we must all face.

That same parable also tells us that God actively labors over us to make us fruitful before making his final judgment. We are not only given time to get things straight, we are also given the care and attention that a good gardener gives to his plants – the raking and the fertilizer and the nourishment that anything requires if it is to be fruitful. I can not tell you why some people die at certain times and others do not. I can not make sense of the senseless in this fashion. But I can and do tell you what Jesus had to say about our making judgments about those who have died, and judgments about God's intention in allowing those deaths to occur as they did.

All of us are in need of the gracious forgiveness of God, that all of us deserve to die as much as anyone else deserves to die, to die without hope of redemption, without hope of seeing the face of God smiling at us and the hand of God giving us the eternal crown of victory and life evermore in his kingdom.

And I can tell you that it is not God's purpose or intention that this should happen to us – but rather, through the labor of his Son – Jesus – he works to make us all that we should be in this life, and that he gives us every chance we need. God gives us time to repent on one hand and what we need to become productive for him on the other. Jesus calls us to make sense of the senseless by giving our own lives meaning before we are called home to God. Do our lives count for anything? Are we fruitful for God? Do we make a difference? Or are our branches bare, and our limbs naked?

Our Lord and Savior is patient with us. He cultivates us and tends to us, even when we ignore him, even when we fail to trust him. But not forever can we put off the day when we are called home to account for what we have done and what we have not done. The question is not whether or not other people's death make sense, whether or not they have deserved their deaths at the time and in the manner that they came to them, but whether or not our lives make sense, whether or not they are fruitful for God and we are ready to meet our maker.