

Bearing Fruit

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon, at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 8th March 2010

Isaiah 55, v2 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?'

Luke 13, v7 'So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"'

The common theme running through all three of this morning's readings is that of repentance. 'Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them', says Isaiah. 'So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall', Paul warns the Corinthians. 'Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did', Jesus says, having been told about the murdered Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. The situations described in these three readings underline people's need for a radical change in the direction of their lives in order to embrace Christ wholeheartedly: the need to stop and think, to turn back, to change one's attitude or mindset. The purpose in each of the readings is not to condemn but to redeem: to alert people while there is still time. They combine encouragement with clear warnings.

The most effective lessons are often those that are clearly and simply conveyed. The parable of the fig-tree is a model of conciseness – it takes a mere four verses to tell – yet it contains several related lessons of great importance. In much of Palestine the soil was shallow and poor, but fruit trees were grown wherever there was sufficient soil to grow them. Sometimes, as in this instance, fig trees or other fruit trees were planted in vineyards. We may assume that the fig-tree had been planted here in a specially favoured position, to enable it to grow: it had a *more than average chance*, but does not prove worthy of it. This is one of several occasions when Jesus reminds people that they will be judged according to the opportunities they have: much will be expected of those to whom much is given. This is a very resonant lesson for anyone who travels in poor countries. When driving through villages in southern Africa, a Westerner cannot but be struck by the sheer inactivity of many of the people: the children with no school to go to who sit or stand and stare, groups of men in the main street with no work. For the most part this is an enforced idleness for people who have no resources to escape it. They have been given few opportunities in life, and it would be cruel to condemn

them. Most of us are, in comparison, hugely blessed with resources and opportunities. We are favoured, like the fig-tree, and we should surely be in a position to bear fruit.

The parable clearly teaches us that uselessness invites disaster. Many would see the whole process of evolution as geared to produce what is useful, so that it may survive, flourish and multiply, while that which is useless is eliminated. There are probably moments when we ask ourselves what difference we make in the world – to those around us and those in our workplace, to our local community, to our nation, to wider world: when we make, however fleetingly, some sort of mental inventory. We should all like to think that somewhere, to someone, we are making a difference – and it is hugely rewarding when people say things to us that indicate that we are. The most searching question that can be asked is ‘of what use were you in this world?’. Surely this is a question which most people, whether Christians, people of other faiths or people of none, would want to answer positively. Africans in South Africa have a proverb which translates roughly as ‘we are people through other people’. We are not fully human if we serve only ourselves. Being useful to others, useful to the world, is an essential part of our humanity here on earth and is, Jesus tells us, the basis on which we shall be judged.

The fig-tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil, but in return was producing nothing. That was its sin – why should it be wasting the soil, the owner of the vineyard not unreasonably demanded, and asked his gardener to cut it down. As human beings we are all planted too. Some of us, like those rural Africans, are planted in poor soil, at least in material terms – though their social soil may be rich if they are fortunate in their parents and families. At the most basic, we all enter this life at some risk to our mothers, and we should not have survived without the care of those who loved us and nurtured us. We have inherited a Christian civilisation, its culture, values and freedoms, which we did not create. We are born in an age when, thanks to the labours of our parents, grandparents and those before them, Britain is a prosperous country. We all have a duty to try and hand on a society that is even better than we found it. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, ‘Die when I may, I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower whenever I thought a flower would grow’. We cannot all be great scientists, making discoveries that transform life for future generations. Most of us will not write great novels, paint pictures that give enduring pleasure, or leave our mark on the nation’s political life. But we can all plant flowers in the course of our lives, at home and at work – sometimes perhaps without being conscious that we are doing so, just by

being ourselves and bringing something of our attitudes and values to bear in conversations and the daily situations that life brings.

The parable of the fig-tree also tells us that there is a *second chance*. A fig-tree normally takes three years to mature – if it is not fruiting by that time it is not likely that it will. But the gardener suggests digging round it and putting in some manure, giving it one more season to see if it can yet bear fruit. We are rather more fortunate than the fig-tree. Most of us live long enough that we don't just get one more chance to bear fruit but many. Peter himself, Jesus' chosen rock, was to deny his Saviour three times but this did not prevent him bearing the fruit of discipleship in the early church. Paul had even persecuted Christians, yet went on to play a seminal role in bringing the Gospel of Christ to peoples in the known world. God is infinitely patient to those who repeatedly fail: like any good teacher or counsellor, he *wants us to succeed*.

But the parable also makes it clear that eventually time and chances do run out – not because God's patience is exhausted, not because he shuts the door, but because his appeal and challenge is so persistently refused that we have shut ourselves out from God – do you remember that telling painting by Holman Hunt, 'The Light of the World', with Jesus knocking at the door? – one of the two originals hangs in Keble College chapel. In some ways the shutting of the door may happen more easily to those of us for whom life is comfortable, materially and in other ways: it is all too easy to fall for the illusion of self-sufficiency, seeing no reason to respond to the challenges and needs of the wider community. We must be ever conscious that, if we are fortunate enough to enjoy good health and material security, if our lives are relatively free from personal and family problems or crises, then we, like the fig-tree, are in a relatively favoured position, a position to bear fruit, to plant flowers, to leave the world a better place.