

Lent 3 2019 Luke 13:1-9 “Ta-dah” moments!

Now into the third week of the season of Lent, our Sunday Gospel prepares us to hear Lent's call to conversion and repentance. Today's reading is found in the chapters of Luke's Gospel that describe Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. During this journey, Jesus teaches and heals. Indeed, this story comes just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we will mark on Palm Sunday, which is three weeks away!

He must also respond to those who question and challenge his authority and actions. There is no parallel in Mark's or Matthew's Gospels for today's reading from Luke. While Mark and Matthew describe an incident in which Jesus curses the fig tree, today's reading makes the barren fig tree the subject of a parable and Luke approaches it in an entirely different way from the other gospel writers.

Luke tells us that some among the crowd report to Jesus a massacre of Galileans by Pilate. The intention of the crowd seems to be to ask Jesus to explain why these people suffered. In those days it was commonplace to blame suffering as evidence of their sinfulness and we still have shades of it in our religious and folk psyche today. What have I/we done to deserve this? Try telling that to the Muslim community in Christchurch, New Zealand!

Jesus challenges this interpretation. Those who were massacred were no more or less sinful than the ones who report the situation to Jesus. Jesus replies that even a fatal accident, a natural disaster ought not to be interpreted as punishment for sin. Jesus, however, offers two causes for the massacre.

First, the ruthless power of the occupying Roman authorities and their approach to religious difference as an opportunity for unbridled, horrific violence as we will see played out as we go, again, through the events of Holy Week and Good Friday. Second is what happens when structures are built on unsound foundations. Jesus knows that the people of Jerusalem are standing into trouble by not living out his teaching and taking the firm, not the high, ground of belief in God's love and justice.

The people ask Jesus about the murder of the Galilean pilgrims, perhaps hoping that he would support the idea that the massacre happened because they were sinful people. Jesus' words at first appear to have a fire-and-brimstone quality. Jesus says in essence, “Repent or perish as these people did; all are sinful before God and deserving of God's punishment.” The tone changes, however, in the parable that follows. The parable of the barren fig tree contrasts the patience and

hopefulness of the gardener with the practicality of the property owner. When told to cut down the fig tree because it is not producing fruit, the gardener says that all should be patience. If properly tended, the barren fig tree may yet bear fruit.

Throughout his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom of God. In this parable, we find an image of God's patience and hopefulness as he prepares his Kingdom. God calls us to repent and it is within his power to punish us for our failure to turn from our sinfulness. And yet God is merciful. He delays punishment and tends to us so that we may yet bear the fruit he desires from us.

The only thing that could overcome the power of Rome then, or the effects of the influence of global financial mismanagement or systematic greed now, is the power of prayer released in ever-increasing circles of influence as more and more people, whom God has named as his own, put God at the centre of their lives.

Sue Pickering, an Anglican retreat conductor, spiritual director and Canon of Taranaki Cathedral writes;

*“This transformation from self-centred to God-centred living does not happen quickly. The fig tree story reminds us of two things: first the hope filled patience of the gardener, the Spirit of Jesus who nurtures our souls until we begin to bear that fruit of love, joy and peace that Paul talks about in Galatians; and second, that the consequences of failing to follow Jesus are as withering and inevitable as the axing of the barren fig tree.”*

This, then, is our reason for hope. Not only does God refuse to abandon us, but he chooses to attend to us even when we show no evidence of his efforts.

So, we are prompted to ask the question. What needs to be transformed in you, in me, our community, our church, and what will be the consequences if no changes are made. I found this lovely quote which I would like to share with you about that fig tree from,

As the American writer Patricia Ryan Madson puts it;

*“Jesus’ parable of the fig tree reminds us of the many “ta-dah” moments in our lives: times when we lose our way, when we are hurting — or have hurt others; spaces in which we find ourselves alone and abandoned; chasms of despair and doubt and despair we fall into. But it is in such “ta-dah” moments that we experience the grace of God in the understanding and support of compassionate family and friends, in the wisdom and guidance of selfless parents and teachers,*

*in the strength and determination we discover within ourselves to carry on. Today's parable of the fig tree has been called the "Gospel of the second chance." The life of God is always about starting over again, about re-creation, about growth and discovery, about the grace to make things right. We always live in the limitless hope and unconditional mercy of God who keeps giving us "ta-dah" moments to rise from the ashes of sin and failings to rebuild and reform our lives."*

Let's hope those "ta-dah" moments come frequently in our lives as we move through Lent to Easter, when we will celebrate the greatest "ta-dah" moment of them all- the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.