

Lk 13.1-9

Well, here we are, a couple of weeks into Lent and we get a sort of ‘wake up and smell the coffee’ sort of gospel. If you began Lent on Ash Wednesday, marked with the smear of dirt on your forehead, full of good intentions to **really** get it right this time round, then you, like me, may well have got to the point when our best laid intentions have once again slipped through our fingers and vanished.

And at the half time break in Lent, just as we’re at the stage when that embarrassing smudge reminding us of our own mortality is as far down the plug hole as our Lenten resolutions, we hear Jesus talking about the axe lying at the foot of the fig tree and along comes the gardener. Jesus is out doing a little spring pruning, and we’re worryingly in the gardener’s sight. Apparently, we’ve had all the best care in the world. Planted some time ago, nurtured with endless care and patience by the gardener, up to our ears in the very finest manure nature could come up with, and not a single, small, feeble fig to show for it. Nothing. Just like this fig tree we’re not

coming up with the goods. And for the gardener, not to mention the fig tree, it’s decision time. Do we get another chance to come up with the figs, or does the gardener decide to clear the ground for something with a guarantee of success for next year’s best in show at Chelsea?

Can I just check up on your knowledge of fig trees for a moment? Gardening’s never been my thing. But you never know, there might be a Charlie Dimmock amongst the congregation who knows all there is to know about figs. No? Well, that’s a relief, so I can share what I do know about middle eastern fig growers.

You see, they certainly did know all about figs when Jesus was telling his horticultural tales. They knew, firstly, that it takes a fig tree three years to mature before there could be any hope of fruit at all while a farmer waited patiently for the fig tree to grow. They also knew, as they looked out over the arid soil of Israel, that land and water could not be wasted on a plant that was useless.

A tree that didn't produce couldn't be kept. And so, they would understand that when three years were up for the tree the owner had every right to take stock and make some decisions.

It's not difficult to understand the impatience of the owner of these fig trees. Who doesn't want instant success and achievement and a return on our investments? Especially when we look over the fence at our neighbour's fig trees laden with ripening fruit and the possibility of an excellent harvest.

But perhaps we can just as easily identify with the fig tree - the one who has disappointed expectations, the slow learner, the one who never quite comes up with the goods, the one who's early promise never quite came to fruition. We judge ourselves to have failed. And before we know it we are looking over the fence at the success of others and feeling resentful and angry that everyone else seems to do so much better than we do. We give up on ourselves and imagine everyone else will too.

But there's a twist in this parable that we need to hear. The grower in Jesus' parable was wise in the ways of living things and knew that not everything in life goes according to plan. Instead of uprooting the barren tree, he suggests to the owner of the field that more time is needed, more care, maybe even a little more manure, however unpleasant that might be for both the grower and the tree. Although the owner sees no use in giving yet more time and precious resources to a tree that has borne no fruit, still the grower asks for patience. The tree is not perfect, no, but the tree is, after all, still alive and might still develop and mature, might still produce something of real value, might still become its best self if only it gets the time it needs.

Growth, *real* growth, the kind that changes us internally forever, comes slowly, and sometimes only through the searing, humiliating experience of failure. It's when we can no longer face ourselves, when we've reached rock bottom, perhaps only then can we go beyond guilt to the possibility of change, only then can we begin to grow.

This is a parable about risk, and hope and trust. It is a parable that weighs perfection and growth in the balance and opts for growth.

Over the last couple of weeks as we've been studying Paul's letter to the Colossians we've been asked to take a close look at ourselves, at our lives and our relationships. To reconsider our efforts, from failure to success. To look again at our inner lives and be realistic about what we find. Not so that we can spend Lent wallowing in self-hatred and useless recriminations. But to take stock, to look out for signs of new growth and treat them with gentle care, and where we see areas which are yet to bear fruit, to be the patient and wise gardener.

I think Jesus' parable of the fig tree and Paul's letter to the Colossians suggest that there is every reason to turn from all that we have been, to look towards all that we could be. To remember what was said on Ash Wednesday as we were marked with the sign of the cross.

'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ.'

Because in turning from our sinfulness and turning once more to Christ we discover that it is possible to fail in honesty and learn openness, that we can fail in chastity and learn love, that we can fail in greed and learn to value true riches, that we can fail in judgement of ourselves and others and learn forgiveness.

We are God's chosen and beloved ones, we can clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We can clothe ourselves once more in Christ.

The parable about the figs is a parable about not giving up on ourselves and the power of repentance and forgiveness.

But being forgiven for our many failures and failings by an all loving and compassionate God is such a difficult concept for us to grasp.

We know all too well how far short of our best laid ideals we fall. Surely, we think, God the all-knowing gardener, must know that too. And yet, and yet, the axe does not fall upon us. We are loved despite ourselves. We are forgiven and we are saved.

And of course, our ability to forgive others is a direct reflection of our lived experience of God's forgiveness of our own failings. It is only when we can begin to feel the compassion and grace with which God meets the mess of our own lives and actions that we can begin to see others in the same light.

"Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive."

This is a story about not giving up on ourselves or one another. And a timely reminder that God's not given up on us either. There is still time to sort ourselves out. But first we have to pick ourselves up and start all over again.

As the ancient story from the Desert Fathers puts it - the old monastic, who was asked by the young seeker, "What do you do in the monastery?" answers simply, "Oh, we fall down and we get up again. And we fall down and we get up again. And we fall down and we get up again."

Amen.