

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON
Reflection – 3rd Sunday of Lent – 20th March 2022

Jane Quarmby, Reader

When we moved into our house here in Provence, one of the things that came with us was a small fig tree, an offshoot of a venerable old tree planted on top of a wall in a courtyard in England. We duly planted it against another wall here and left it to its own devices. It's now a respectable size and gives us baskets of fruit every year. Others have sowed themselves where they wished to and with no intervention from us are busy growing and giving us lovely black sweet figs every year. So, when I read the gospel reading for today with my gardener's hat on, I found it rather odd that a lovingly tended fig tree wasn't giving fruit. Was it because it had no other fig trees nearby to pollinate the fruit? No, because figs self-pollinate - they don't need others to bear fruit. Was it lack of water? I doubt it – we don't water ours – they have long roots so they can find water. Was the soil too poor? Well, fig trees will only fruit if the growing conditions are tough – too much good soil and all you'll get are leaves, no fruit.

So why, I wondered, still with my literal and gardeners' hat on, would a gardener who presumably knew his stuff, want to water, and manure a tree not bearing fruit? Better by far to leave it alone surely.

Or was it that the gardener was fond of the old tree and couldn't bear to see it chopped down, so he pleaded for one last chance, regardless of whether it gave fruit or not? Perhaps he ate his lunch under its shade, perhaps he had grown it from seed, or he just liked the shape. Or it is it, because this is one of Jesus's teaching parables, that the fig tree is in fact Israel. He is saying that unless the nation of Israel produced the fruit of repentance, then it will face judgement and destruction. It will be chopped down and destroyed. All through the Bible, Israel is often referred to as a vineyard or a fig tree that God will judge and find lacking.

To see the stump of a tree is I think very sad – it symbolises destruction, and to see a bare hillside which has been felled and cleared is horrible. I know that in time the seeds buried in the ground by birds and other animals will sprout and new trees will grow, but the very act of felling a tree is a deeply upsetting sight, as it crashes to the floor, branches breaking off and leaving a huge gap in the forest.

Jesus loves Israel and knows that although he is doing all he can to turn things around, to bring the people back to God; if they don't understand and act on his words, then they too will be felled, come crashing down and leave nothing but a bare stump. As of course does happen when some decades later, Rome finally loses all patience, turns on Israel and inflicts mass destruction and death. Israel and its leaders stubbornly keep going in the wrong direction, looking for war against the Romans rather than taking note of the new commandments that Jesus has brought – love God and love one another. Don't focus on the fruit of today, on consuming and buying "stuff", on amassing money, on ignoring the problems and hardship of your neighbour, on continuing on your own self-centred way, on taking the route of violence.

Just before Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree, he's told about Pilate ordering the murder of some pilgrims from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices in the temple. This was so shocking – as though the local prefecture had murdered one of our congregations in one of our worship centres on a Sunday. At the time, it was commonly believed that bad things happened to bad people, so the pilgrims must have been bad people and deserved what happened to them. Jesus firmly debunks that idea, along with the example of a tower falling on 18 people in Siloam and killing them. They weren't the worst sinners, that's not why they suffered, they weren't punished by God in these ways at all. In his view, everyone needs to repent, to turn away from evil and back to God, otherwise they'll all perish.

This dire warning is echoed by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, reminding us of the things that happened on the way out of Egypt in the Exodus. Whilst the people believed in God and kept to his Commandments, all was well. God made the Egyptians set them free, parted the waters of the Red Sea, gave them food and drink in the wilderness. But left to their own devices, the people relapsed, grumbling and worshipping statues they'd made themselves, having wild parties and were destroyed for their sins. God can take away as well as give. Paul says

“these things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us...” And so, it goes on, reminding us that God cares for his people but will judge those who rebel against him, who don’t believe in him. It’s common theme throughout the Bible, one long plea for humanity to follow God, to practise good, not evil. Only then will we all find heaven, the kingdom of God, here on earth.

Going back to the story of the fig tree – does Jesus mean that he is the gardener, or is he the vineyard owner? Whether he means he is the gardener, sent by God to sort out the vineyard and is pleading for one last chance before the fig tree is cut down, or whether he is the owner, looking for signs of health and fruit, it doesn’t really make a difference. Either way, he knows at this point that the people he wants to save, to turn around to live better lives, to save themselves from destruction, aren’t really listening to him. He has some who follow him, but they don’t really understand what he is or what he’s about. How must he have felt? Perhaps it’s telling that in his story the gardener says finally that he’ll give it one last try and if it doesn’t work, then the tree can be cut down.

It’s the case in any good productive garden that a plant that doesn’t perform is weeded out. God’s garden is no different. The message hasn’t changed over the centuries since Jesus’s time. People haven’t changed. On the one hand we have war in so many countries, including in Europe now, hatred spilling out into violence, more powerful people abusing the weak, hunger, homelessness, refugees, poverty, squalor and hardship are still with us, caused by the choices made by those with power to put things right. As a species we are close to wiping ourselves out through the damage we are doing to the planet on which we live. On the other hand we have people working hard to bring help to those who need it most – working on the ground to dig wells, find better ways of growing food, cleaning up the oceans of plastic, giving refugees homes, sending convoys of aid to war zones, risking their lives to bring out women and children from Ukraine, developing new ways to heat and power our homes, battling against infection and disease on a daily basis. Small acts of kindness every day. It’s easy to focus on the bad because that makes headlines, but there’s a balance to be had.

It’s up to us whether we want to be a weed or a cherished plant in God’s garden.

I certainly don’t want to end up on the bonfire in the autumn!

Amen.