

Arnhem-Nijmegen, Lent 3, Year C, March 23rd 2025 – Revd Dorienke de Vries
Readings: Is 55.1-9; Psalm 63.1-9; 1 Cor 10.1-13; Luke 13.1-9

I preached about this same passage three years ago. So preparing for this one I did what every preacher will do in such a case: I went back to that sermon to see how the text spoke to me then. Now this was just after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the first bit of the passage seemed to speak prophetically into that horrific event. Reading the sermon again, I was very sad to see that I could have written exactly the same one for today; the only difference would have been the addition of a few more names of powerful and violent men, and of many other atrocities that the world has seen in the past three years. There was a message for the powerful and the violent there. But not just for them.

Three years have passed – exactly the number of years that is mentioned in the second part of this passage, the parable of the fig tree. Again, there is a message for the powerful and the violent there. And again – not just for them.

So let us have a look at the second half of this gospel passage. After having been planted, fig trees need three years to mature. If they do not bear fruit in their third year, they are not likely to bear fruit at all, and so they are useless. A waste of space. The land owner has been very patient already: for three years he has been coming looking for fruit. The fig tree therefore must be 6 years old by now, and still produces nothing. It is a hopeless case. No wonder the land owner is fed up with it and wants it to be cut down. But the gardener – the one who tends the trees and is probably fond of them – he asks for yet another year, for yet another chance.

The fig tree was a well-known image for the people of Israel. And so the meaning of this parable is not very hard to discern. The people of Israel have had every chance to repent, to respond to the good news – first in the preaching of John the Baptist, and then in the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus himself. Their fig tree was planted in the best soil the farmer could find, giving it more than average chance, but it is giving nothing in return for all the care it has received. It will be judged according to the opportunities it has been given.

It is also not very hard to apply this parable to our own time. For 2000 years now the world has been receiving the good news of Christ. God has been sending his prophets and his priests, offering the living water, offering the bread and wine of the kingdom. Time and again we have been shown the way to life in abundance for all, but time and again we squander the gifts of God, and choose a way of greed and self-interest instead. We have had so many opportunities to do something good for the world, but always the amount of money spent on weapons would surpass the amount of money spent on healthcare, education, sustainable agriculture and charitable giving – leading again to a dangerous and explosive global situation. I read a quote somewhere that painted a perfect picture of the current state of affairs: ‘We have the powers of gods and we use them like irresponsible schoolboys.’ We have the powers of gods and use them like irresponsible schoolboys. Need I say more? We can only pray for God’s grace and patience, and for his Spirit to turn the hearts of the powerful.

However, it is very tempting to apply this parable to others, and forget to heed the message it has for us. For our personal lives and for our church.

We have been planted in rich soil. We have the opportunity to gather for worship every week. To be fed with God’s word, with bread and wine, with fellowship. You could say that every week the gardener is digging around us, and putting manure on our roots. What are we giving in return? What kind of fruit, if any, are we producing?

The parable teaches us that nothing which only takes out can survive. The fig tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil, but only for its own survival. It took more than it gave. It did not fulfil its purpose, its calling, if you like.

The gardener, however, seems to like hopeless cases. And so this message of warning is also a message of hope and grace. The parable does not tell us what happened after the gardener had taken that extra trouble. It is for us to decide today, and every day, how to respond to the grace and the patience we are being shown. In chapter 12 Jesus has said, 'From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.' The parable is just another way of saying the same thing.

So the most searching question we are asked today is 'Of what use are we in this world? What do we do with the time and the opportunities that we receive?'

It is a daunting question. Precisely because of the situation that is described in the quote I mentioned before: Powerful men behaving like irresponsible schoolboys. Causing a hurricane of hate and violence and injustice all around the globe. Of what use is one fig tree in a storm like that? Just to remain standing is already a challenge. It is tempting to become focussed on our own survival. Even to become obsessed by it.

However, we are called to produce fruit that is of use to others. People are being poisoned with lies. We are called to nourish them with the truth. People are scared and anxious. We are called to comfort them with the promise of God's presence. People are increasingly lonely and isolated from each other. We are called to offer them love and fellowship and true community. People have been driven from their homes, their countries. We are called to offer them shelter, and to make them feel they belong somewhere. People are being exploited and pushed into poverty. We are called to expose the injustice being done to them; called to resist the systems that support and continue this injustice; and we are called to share from our own wealth and to show generosity to all who are in need of it.

And that is something we can do! Even though we are small. Even though we feel insignificant. So let us put our roots down into the rich soil of God's grace. Let us draw water and nourishment from that soil and make sure the care of the gardener is not in vain. And then may God bless our little fig tree, and the fruit we manage to produce in the time that is given to us.

Amen.