

Luke 13: 1-9 Repent or Perish...Parable of Fig Tree 23rd Mar 2025

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you our Lord, our rock and redeemer.

Who likes figs? Michael and I love figs so we have grown fig trees to varying success over the past years. We have one fig tree in our family holiday house (Michael's grandparents miners cottage) in Wonthaggi, planted from a cutting from a fig tree that was growing at Bible College Victoria in Lilydale, back in about 2006. We had been given some of the figs off that tree and they were so sweet and full and delicious. The tree produced very good fruit. So Michael took a cutting and nurtured it and planted it and it grew and grew and it now produces abundant and delicious fruit, but needs to be pruned and watered well. With not enough water their growth is stunted and fruit is dry. (show produce 😊)

When we moved to Hobart we bought a fig tree and planted it, but after a number of months it was obvious it was dying. While Michael was doing his best to nurture it a big gum tree next door was taking all the nutrients from the soil. I used this as an illustration in a sermon on flourishing one day when I was a minister at the Cathedral in Hobart and two people went out and bought us new fig trees! We kept those trees in pots for a while until we bought our own house and planted them out, we nurtured them and before we left to move here they were both producing figs – ah, leaving one's garden behind is difficult!

What about us, how are we growing? Are we getting all the good things we need to grow fruit? Or is something else taking those good things away? Have we confined ourselves to a comfortable pot which has stunted our growth? Or have we soaked ourselves in the word of God and in prayer and asked the Holy Spirit to nurture us and teach us and grow us so that we are producing fruit that others can be blessed with.

And what about the Church? Are we producing fruit? Do we need a bit of digging around and some fertilizing? I'm excited to be appointed here as Rector at this time, especially with the Hope25 initiative as we seek to build up our hope in Jesus and share it with others. With God's grace and the working of the Holy Spirit I can't wait to see what we may produce.

Let's take a look at this parable of the fig tree parable, but before that come two other stories in our reading. Jesus had been teaching a crowd of many thousands who had gathered. He had told them they need to be watchful and needed to be able to interpret the times. And then some who were present told Jesus a horrific story of how some Galileans had been killed by Pilate while they were offering sacrifices in the temple. We

don't know the details of this story. Sadly we do know of stories even today where Christians have been killed while worshipping in churches, such as in the Congo and Nigeria.

The people who told Jesus the story of the Galileans were perhaps wondering if this was a sign of the end times that Jesus had been talking about they should be watching for. Or did they wonder if these Galileans had done something very sinful to be punished in such a way? In Ancient times it was generally assumed that calamity would befall on those who were extremely sinful. Remember the question that was put to Jesus about a blind man in John 9...*who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?* Jesus said neither. Likewise, he says these Galileans were no worse sinners than any other. The sin came from the those who committed the murders.

But rather than speak of the horror of this situation or make any political comment on Pilate, Jesus just responds with... *repent or you too will perish*. And he goes on to tell another story of 18 who had died when the tower in Siloam fell on them and says neither were they guiltier than any of the others living in Jerusalem. We are all sinners. So repent or perish! Atrocious crimes happen where people are murdered, accidents happen where people are killed, illness and disease come and rob people of life. People here, my 40 year old nephew with terminal bowel cancer. Are you ready? Repent or perish. When we repent, then whatever befalls us, we will not perish but have eternal life

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the fig tree, an illustration of what true repentance looks like.

The owner of the vineyard had a fig tree and each year went to see if there was any fruit on it, but there was none. He had been looking out for 3 years, a reasonable amount of time to expect to find some fruit. Even our little trees in pots began to produce fruit before they were planted.

So, the owner says to the man who took care of the vineyard to cut it down. It is wasting soil space, there was no use in just maintaining it if it is not going to produce the fruit that it was created for.

Repentance is not just about saying sorry, asking for forgiveness and then just sitting back and doing nothing. True repentance involves turning around, it involves transformation, it involves growing in faith and producing fruit. This is what we were created for. In John 15:16, Jesus says tells his disciples *"I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last."*

Some say this fig tree could represent the state of Israel that was in such a bad way and was not bearing fruit to glorify God. Later in this chapter we read of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, for they had rejected him.

But this parable can equally represent ourselves.

Firstly, what should our lives be looking like if we are bearing fruit worthy of repentance. We can think straight away of the fruits of the spirit from Galatians, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Have a think of your own lives – is this fruit evident? I know I need to work on my patience, how about you? Someone asked for prayer for increased gentleness recently.

How else may fruit manifest itself? Are we growing in our relationship with God, spending time reading his word, praying and worshipping him so that we may reflect his glory? That would certainly show that we were blossoming. Are we giving financially to the mission of the Church? Are we actively seeking to grow the kingdom of God? Are we sharing our faith with family, friends and neighbours? I am so encouraged when I hear how many of you are doing this.

And then as we think about the bigger picture, what about us as a Church? We often look back and speak of the fruitful past when there were families and children and after school clubs, times when the Church seemed to be growing. But sadly in more recent years I hear of times of decline and perhaps disease, times of trying just to stay alive, let alone be fruitful. Times have changed and our secular society makes it hard. However, God doesn't change and he calls us persevere, God is alive and well and longs to see new life in our churches. In many parts of the world the church is growing – in China, in Africa.

I am encouraged that there are many signs of life here. I see faithful people, eager to nurture their faith with a desire to grow and bear fruit. I see people who care for one another. I see a desire to reach those in our community who don't know the amazing love of Jesus and are missing out on abundant life in him.

Like the owner of the fig tree who was looking for fruit to see if it was worth keeping the tree, we can look at some churches and wonder if it is time to cut them down. In the Tasmania Diocese I have just come from many churches were being assessed as their viability. Were they growing and producing fruit, or were they being a drain on the soil?

As I became Rector of my last Parish, one building had been closed as it was deemed to no longer be viable to continue to worship there. But the Parish itself was not cut down.

The carer of the fig tree in this parable pleaded for the tree, asking for one more year to dig around and fertilize it to see if it might indeed bear fruit. If there is still nothing in one year, then by all means cut it down he says. The tree was given a reprieve.

The parish I was in had also been given a reprieve. It was pruned, of one site, but the Bishop gave us 5 years to see if it would bear fruit and be a viable Parish once more. I am pleased to say that it was beginning to really flourish when I left it after being there for 5 and a half years. On Wednesday night the new Rector was inducted, the church has signs of growth and fruit.

Many suggest that the owner of the vineyard represents God and that the man who cares and pleads for the tree and offers to nurture it is Jesus. God has every right to judge us for not bearing fruit, but this parable shows us his amazing grace as well. Jesus pleads for us, just as he did for his disciples in the garden before he was arrested or as he called for forgiveness for his murderers as he hung on the cross.

Jesus' response of "repent or perish" to the stories of murder and calamity may sound callous to us – but his compassion is that he longs for all to come to repentance and to have a restored relationship with the Father. In 2 Peter 3 after speaking of the day of judgement, Peter says this; *With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Jesus longs for us all to repent and be living transformed fruitful lives, he longs for all to know the salvation and eternal life he offers. I am sure he is interceding for us, just like the man who pleaded to give the tree one more chance. God delays judgement, but there is a warning in today's reading, that we must repent, that we must not delay. Unexpected atrocities and calamities will happen and one day Jesus will return to judge.

I am excited at the opportunities we have in this parish to be a fruitful Church. We need to be watered and fed well by the word and spirit. We need to continue to be fervent in our prayers. There are already encouraging good signs, (recent baptisms) and I pray that we will continue to grow both in our own individual faith lives and in the Church.

Let us pray:

Lord, we thank you for your loving patience with us, I pray that we may be faithful to you, that we will come to you in repentance and be transformed by your grace and that we will see much fruit with your Kingdom growing here in Bass and Phillip Island. In the precious name of Jesus. Amen.