

GOSPEL WONDERS

A different way to look at the gospels

The Fig Tree (suggested) Order of Service

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(all hymns from Singing the Faith)

Opening Prayer

Lord God: in among the general toils and troubles of life there is one constant. One thing that is solid and unfailing. That is You. At times we feel that You are far away. At others so close that we feel we can touch you. You the Almighty Creator, Lord of Life are with us and cares what happens. For this we give you our grateful thanks. We are truly blessed.

We live on your farm Lord. We know that you will never see us as worthless and of no value and will always be precious to you.

While for all these blessing we return your love, if we are being really honest then we must confess that sometimes we do let you down. For those times we have to both confess and seek your forgiveness. You know what we mean. The times when we do or say something that we realise, later, was wrong or hurtful both to ourselves and others. Or these occasions when others know that we are your people and yet our actions present a poor image of you. At such times, we, in all sincerity ask your forgiveness.

Maybe we ought to spend a little time in silence and in that silence think, is there anything that we need to take before the Lord today.

(silence)

Through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus know that your sins are forgiven.

Let us share in the family prayer:

Our father ...

Amen

Introduction

Have you ever come across the situation where there is one plant on your farm, garden, window box that does not make the grade? Doesn't actually die and turn up its roots but has always been a bit 'iffy'.

Have you also noticed that there is invariably a split opinion about what is to be done with it? One side says "waste of space, spoils the view, got to go" whereas the other says no give it another chance.

Our story today takes us to a farm where exactly that is happening. Think about it; which side would you be on? The strictly practical and business-like approach or maybe the more sentimental, with the gentle heart and deep rooted sense of fair play or is it possible that you might have other overriding considerations

As we tell our story through the eyes of those who were there these are a few thoughts you might care to consider.

So, for now we go back to farm, in this case situated in first century Palestine. The impression we get is that it is part of an estate where the owner employs a number of staff including a farm manager. The owner being a person thought to have above average wealth but this might not be the case. Equally the manager might give the impression that he just does what he is told. But does the story support this or is he a very knowledgeable and considerate man with solid ideas of his own. Well able to stand up for himself and what appears right. We shall see.

But for now, please enjoy our story.

Eleazer, the Farmer

Do you know it seems to me that the more money, land, goods a person has the meaner they become. When anything new comes up the first thing they ask is will I make a profit and how much.

Well! My boss is a beauty. Talk about tight. He is so mean that he learned to light a cigarette in his pocket so that he wouldn't have to take the packet out and share them round. He got the nick name around here of short arms and long pockets. Behind his back of course.

It was the same around the farm. If anything wasn't making the profit or producing a good enough crop it had to go whether it was an animal or something from out of the ground.

Let me tell you about that fig tree. It was in the corner of the field near the gate into the yard. It had been planted along with the rest but, for some reason it hadn't flourished like the rest. It may be because; it was at the corner where the wind came round the end of the house and battered it or that edge had poor soil, or even that it got trampled and knocked about as the animals pushed past it. I just don't know but it was a poor wee thing and after three years there had not been a single fig and no sign of one now. I mean it wasn't doing any harm and left to itself, who knows.

But now. His great oneship wouldn't have it. He complained every time he saw it. Which was, in fact, every time he came in or out.

Waste of time, an offence on a well-run farm, valuable land wasted. Then one day something must have really annoyed him and he took it out on the little fig tree.

I saw him standing looking at it. I want it cut down, chopped up into little pieces and thrown on the fire. Now! I don't usually argue with him. Just do what I'm told. But somehow his whole attitude seemed petty and, yes, childish to me. OK, I know it sounds soft of me, going all sappy about a tree but I told him that I thought he was being harsh and that because of the trees position and having a hard time of it then eventually it could fight for its life and grow up really strong and then give him a lot of good fruit in the future.

Just give it another year I said "I'll give it a bit of TLC and let's see what happens".

He looked at me and I thought "Oh no! Shouldn't have done that, I'm for it now. Then he grunted, I think he said Ok just one year. Turned on his heel and stomped of.

Just then I turned round and saw young Sarah from the kitchen standing watching. She must have seen and heard what had happened I gave her a wink and she smiled back. I think I have a supporter there.

Any way we will have to see what happens.

Sarah, a servant

I am, in this house, what is officially known as the under cook. That means that I am one up from the scullery maid and one down from the cook. In other words, I am the general dog's body and if anything goes wrong it somehow turns out to be me that gets the blame.

There are, however, some good things about my elevated position. Like I get to hear all the household gossip. You see all the other staff, at some time come into the kitchen and if I am working away quietly in my corner nobody realizes I am there. So it's surprising what I hear. Then another of my duties is that when the kitchen needs anything from the farm or garden, I am the one who goes out to get it. This means that I get out of the hot and stuffy kitchen into the fresh air for a while. But! and this is the good bit, I get a chance to talk too and listen to the outside staff. You know I think I must be the best informed person on the estate. That's why I heard some of the others laughing about the master's attitude to the little fig tree. I knew just which one they meant because when I had to go outside, I had to go out of the kitchen, walk round the outside of the house and come through the gate into the yard, so I had to pass the fig tree they were talking about. Alright I know it wasn't really mine but I liked it and as other people were always making jokes and laughing about it, I sort of adopted it. Sometimes as I passed, I might say something nice to it or stoke some of its leaves. I know it was a weedy looking little thing. Sort of stunted and it never seem to have any fruit but maybe that's what drew me to it. I had had a bit of a difficult childhood. No parents that I remember and having to fight for everything I had. In fact, nowhere to call home until I got this job so I could feel for this little thing having to struggle against the odds. You can have a laugh if you want. Some of the others do. But I don't care.

Anyway, this day I came round the corner and there was the master with Eleazer, the farm manager. He, the master, was pointing to the fig tree and shouting about it being a waste of time and effort and not doing anything to earn its keep and why hadn't Eleazer done something about it. Then before he got an answer shouted that it had to be cut down and burned.

You can imagine how I felt about that. I was so angry and felt tears hot and salty in my eyes and running down my face. How could he do that, what had the little tree done to harm him, nothing, he was just a bully. Do you know I was so mad I was going to tell him how I felt. Now I know and you know that, in my position that would have been a very silly thing to do and it was Eleazer who saved me. Just as I was moving forward, he gave the master a piece of his mind and said that it should have another year. As the master turned round, I think he saw me and the expression on my face He just grunted, muttered something and stormed off. Eleazer turned to me and winked.

Our little secret then he said, all it needs is a bit of TLC.

Now that tree gets more TLC than anything else on the farm. With two of us caring for it I recon it'll do just fine.

Rebecca, the landowner's wife

That husband of mine. I know that people consider him a bit of a tightwad but they don't understand him. They don't know what he is up against. All the bills he has to pay to keep this estate running and the number of people he provides for. He has to do this out of the profit he can make out of buying and selling and in some years trying to do this is very difficult. People think that he has pots of money. I have to admit so did I when I first married him. It was the usual thing. My father had an attractive and a well-trained daughter. His father was looking for a suitable bride and one who could provide him with grandsons to keep the estate in the family. They put their heads together thought it would be a good idea, we were told about it and after we had looked each other over we thought it would be a good idea as well. I admit that I quite fancied being the wife of a rich man. So that was that.

All went well at first. Agreed we had a few serious discussions about money but things settled down and, to be fair, though I know he's not too popular with the staff He has always been good to me and I have always tried to be a good wife to him. So, all was going well. We were happy and things were going well. Then his father died and left the estate and business to him.

All of a sudden, my husband was the master and owner of a large estate and a business and it quickly became obvious that he was not the best of business men. To be fair he would have made a better Rabbi. He was good at talking to people and had a real gentle streak when you could find it. But now he had to spend all his time ordering people about or arguing and haggling with merchants and I am sure that, at times, he did not do it very well and then he would come home stamping his feet and shouting at everybody. Now he never discussed business with me but I could tell and I could hear the comments that went around. It used to hurt me and I know it was so difficult for him. The other day was a prime example.

I had heard him muttering about that silly little fig tree when he came into the house. It wasn't the first time but this had gone further. I asked him outright what had happened and he muttered something about Eleazer going all gooe-eyed over a worthless tree and what a waste it was giving up a patch of land for something that wasn't going to make a profit and now they would only laugh at him. In a year, you see, the wretched thing would be dripping with figs and Eleazer would be grinning all over his face.

I did something I have never done before a put my arms round him and he did something he had never done before, he burst into tears and there we sat holding on to each other. Then to cap it all a servant walked in so that little scene will be everywhere by this evening.

All this because he gave a silly little tree a second chance. That must have been a very hard decision for him to make.

Prayers of intercession

So, we come to a time when we pause, a time to think, and a time to remember the broader picture. A time to consider the world. A world that is in reality Gods farm and in that light pray for those who live and work in it and for those we share it with.

So, let us pray.

First of all, let us pray for the church. For the world-wide church and its many followers.

We know Lord that in some places the church appears to be declining and yet in others it is growing at a tremendous pace. While this is true let us remember that even in those places where numbers seem to be reducing there are faithful people who daily keep their faith and work for you. For them and for the growing numbers of your followers we pray. That day by day their faith will be strengthened and that their leaders will understand your word and lead the church in the direction that you would wish it to go.

Then Lord we need to think of the wider world. Watching the news, it often seems that we are in a sorry state. We see violence erupting for so many different reasons. The search for wealth, power and just plain greed. The pressures put on the individual by society, and ethnic and religious differences.

We would pray Lord for all these situations and the people who are involved. We would ask that you generate a feeling of love that will see a worldwide openness in views and values so that all may find peace and happiness sharing the blessings that you give.

Finally, Lord we bring our prayers very close and think of people and situations that are close to our own hearts. Those we know who, at this time who are suffering from problems of health, loneliness or other difficulties. Who today see themselves in a dark place and are finding it difficult to find the light. We also remember particular situations that are of particular importance to us as individuals.

Lord: in the silence of our hearts, we lay these before you and ask that you give your consideration.

All these we lay before you our Gracious Lord. Please hear our prayers.

Amen

Conclusion

So why did Jesus tell this parable? For that matter what was it about? On the face of it we have a simple everyday story, but when we look at it more carefully, we find not only one that is lit by grace but also one that is packed with warnings.

You see, this fig tree appears to have a special place in people's hearts and minds. For better or for worse. It had become important to them. The problem was that it hadn't lived up to expectations. It had let down the farmer who had planted it, the landowner who had instructed him and the lassie who had, in her own way, loved it. It had had its chance and hadn't used it. It quite simply was useless and the parable makes it clear that uselessness invited disaster. Now it also comes out and says that anything that one takes out of life and doesn't put anything into life can't survive. If you want to analyse it; it's pointing out that there are only two types of person, those who take out of life and put nothing back and those who do return something of the blessings they have been given. Think about it, we all owe a debt to life. We are only here because somebody else put their life at risk and we would never have survived without the care and teaching of others. We have been handed a Christian civilisation and a freedom which we did not create so would it be reasonable to say that we have a duty to pass on to the future more and better than we received. Should we accept that then we will be the ones to fulfil our obligation to life. Carl Rogers, an American Psychologist, had a tutor who told students you should never be an Arsenal you should always be a Canon. By this he meant that you should not absorb and store knowledge but that should use it and send it out so that its benefits could be used. A good line to remember.

This parable then is the gospel of the second chance. A fig tree does I understand normally come to maturity in three years. If it is not fruiting by that time then it isn't going to. But ours is the 'gospel of the second chance' and Jesus gives us chance after chance after chance as Peter, Mark and Paul would testify to. But even then, there is a limit. If we continue to reject God's blessing time after time there will come a time when we turn away from the final chance. Not I would hasten to say that God finally gets fed up with us and shuts us out but quite simply that we shut ourselves out from Him and even then, we will find that God will save us from even that.

So, what sort of a message or challenge do we take from this parable. What is He trying to tell us? Something about not giving up, 'maybe'. Something about to do with being given chances, could it be to remember that there are those who care about us and are willing to plead our cause. Even that when we see someone in trouble then we can plead their cause.

When we are dealing with Jesus things are seldom simple or straight forward. He speaks directly to us and says where you stand at this moment. Look into your own heart. Is there anything you need to do today for anyone or is there any thing you need from somebody else? Not necessarily a big life changing thing but it could be

something as simple as a telephone call, an email or a “thinking of you” card. Something you need from somebody or something you can do for somebody else to show that you care. Think about that for a little while.

Where do we stand today?

Epilogue

Now our service ends.

Now we part as friends.

Our songs, our prayers, our thoughts ascend,

To where forgiveness finds a friend.

His joy our hearts will fill.

He's there through good and ill.

So, let us all leave this place.

Blessed by His unending grace.

He goes with us a tale to tell.

That through His love all will be well.