**Sermon Sunday 23rd March 2025**

Stowe Church

9.45 Morning Prayer

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9 ‘Love the Lord your God with all…’

Luke 13: 1-9 fig tree – to cut down or not?

Our gospel reading is in two parts, which on the face of it have very little to do with each other. We shall see.

The first part, vv 1-5, tells of two incidents in which Jews were killed, some at the hand of Herod and others who perished when a tower fell down on them at Siloam. Neither of these tragedies is recorded anywhere else, so we know little about them. Herod was known as a cruel king, so we probably aren’t surprised about a story in which he killed some Jews while they were offering their sacrifices during a service of worship.

The other account of 18 killed by a falling tower is even more obscure and we know nothing about it.

But the point Jesus is making in both these events is to affirm that neither of those two groups who were killed were to blame in any way.

Now the Jews had always made a strong link between sin and suffering. If you are suffering, you must have sinned. You may remember from John’s gospel the disciples asking Jesus about a man born blind, ‘Was it his sin or his parents’ sin that caused his suffering?’ And Jesus had said ‘Neither.’ But the implication by the disciples was that sin was behind the man’s blindness. No, said Jesus.

And here in today’s reading Jesus again insisted there was no link between those who died and their sin. It was not their sin that caused them to die. Of course, we can confirm that for ourselves, by looking at the suffering and death of Jesus – was he to blame for his suffering? Of course not.

And then Jesus adds another twist, as he often did, turning things upside down. Though all suffering is not the result of sin, sin can result in suffering.. We need to repent of our sins. Even if God doesn’t condemn us to death every time we sin, which we deserve, we shouldn’t take it for granted that he will always and for ever let us off the hook. Only his mercy and grace does that – and he urges us to confess our sin so God can forgive our sin and rebuild our relationship with him. As John says in his first letter, ‘if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’

Then we come to the parable Jesus told, a parable about a fig tree. Fig trees were popular, though you couldn’t guarantee fruit. In this parable, a man planted a fig but for three years – no fruit. So he told the member of staff who looked after it to dig it up and throw it away as useless. The staff member urged that it be left alone for one more year, to give it another chance.

Now I’m not a gardener. Susan does all the planning for our garden at home. I do the heavy lifting and cut the grass, putting down paving slabs and so on.

So when I came across this parable, it seemed obvious to me that anything which had been planted and nurtured and yet bore no fruit should simply be dug up and put in the brown bin. End of.

But then I read something that changed my mind. It’s true of fig trees, and many other fruiting trees, that you shouldn’t expect a big harvest from your tree for the first year after planting, or the second year, and probably not the third year either. It takes time for such trees to mature before bearing fruit.

So if you are a gardener, you will know only too well that one of the most important gifts you need is patience. I know some things grow without being tended and nursed – most of them are called weeds – but for lots of plants it takes time to see the fruits of your labours.

What was Jesus getting at here? I believe he’s reflecting on the grace of God, who looks at what we do and often despairs. But in his mercy he gives us another chance.

Now perhaps we can see a link between these two passages: God’s mercy and grace. The gardener gave the fig tree another chance when it didn’t bear fruit; and we are given a second chance when we sin. And just as the tree is then expected to bear fruit, so we are expected to ask forgiveness and change our ways.

Let me make a few points. First, the fig tree occupied a specially favoured position. It would not be unusual to see, fig trees, thorn bushes and apple trees in vineyards. . In Israel the soil was usually quite poor and thin, so they grew whatever they could wherever there was enough soil to grow them. The fig tree had a better than average chance of surviving so they were quite popular; generally they did well. Jesus often reminded his listeners that they would be judged according to the opportunities they were given.

Secondly, the parable teaches us that uselessness invites disaster. Some have claimed that the whole purpose of evolution in this world is to produce useful things, so that what is useful with thrive and what is useless will vanish. The most searching question we can be asked is: ‘Of what use have you been in this world?’

Third, the parable teaches that nothing which only takes can survive. A fruit tree is only worth keeping if it produces fruit. That’s why it’s there! If it’s taking goodness from the soil but giving nothing in return, better to dig it up and replace it with a tree that does bear fruit. Jesus is saying that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who take out more than they put in, and those who put in more than they take out. Abraham Lincoln once said, ‘I want it be said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow.’

Another lesson of this parable is to show us the gospel of the second chance. The fig tree was given a second chance; Jesus gave second chances to many, including Peter who denied him, Mark who decided to go home during one of Paul’s missionary journeys, and Paul himself who started out persecuting Christians, until he met Jesus on the Damascus road.

Lastly, and this is a sobering thought, we learn that there is a final chance, beyond which we are doomed. We’re not talking about Christians here, because once you are a Christian ‘none shall pluck them out of my hand’ as Jesus said. But for the non-believer, God appeals time and again, often through us and our witness, but if he is rejected every time, the day finally comes, not that God shuts them out but that they shut themselves out. We all have free will.

To close, let me return to our first reading from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is a word that means ‘second law’, indicating that it is a second telling of many incidents that have already been recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, including the giving of the Ten Commandments. In fact, Deuteronomy is the most quoted book in the NT.

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 are probably the most quoted verses in the Bible. Why? Because orthodox Jews would know these verses as the Shema, and would recite them every morning and evening – as they have been for hundreds of years.

These verses are basically saying: Love your God with everything you’ve got. With the whole of you. Hold nothing back. Good advice today for us.

What does that mean? Keep a close relationship with God, admit your sins and shortcomings, ask forgiveness and seek to follow his will. That’s what loving God means. Quite a lot of people at BPC are following a series written by John Mark Comer called ‘Practicing the Way’, and he sums up our Formation as Christians as

being with Jesus,

becoming like Jesus, and

doing what Jesus did.

That sounds to me a great recipe for bearing good fruit.