

### Lent 3 Luke 13:1-9

How many of us struggle to be patient? We are placed in situations which require patience all of the time and yet many of us really struggle to manage to wait well. Think of every time you have to queue for something, do you feel like this is a good thing to do or a waste of time? Do you become irritated and grumpy about being made to wait? What about in traffic jams or the doctor's waiting room? Each day most of us will spend some time waiting for something and we can respond to that need to wait either patiently or impatiently and most of us would seek to be patient.

Our society makes every effort to reduce waiting times by valuing efficiency, and where waiting is unavoidable, the preference is for something to be provided for entertainment to take our minds off it. Waiting rooms are stocked with magazines to read, and increasingly televisions. Many of us have technology in our mobile phones which allows us to catch up on the latest news or social media while we have a moment to wait. Rarely are we encouraged to dwell patiently in a period of waiting in our day to day lives.

Yet, in today's readings we are told that God sometimes makes us wait. Abraham was promised many things in his covenant with God, but it took decades for him to see the results of this covenant in his life. The promise of being a father to a vast nation took until Abraham and Sarah were by rights too old to conceive and bear children, and in fact it was only Isaac who was born to them and Ishmael born to Hagar, so there was not even a large family in the first generation for Abraham to see the promise fulfilled.

St Paul, in his correspondence to the church in Philippi, charges the people to remember their promises in heaven as they face their difficulties on earth. This teaching is one of patience and perseverance for people who are struggling to keep sight of what it is all for. Without using the word, Paul is urging patience to the church in keeping faithful to the promise of God which may not always be easy to see playing out in their lives.

Then we hear from Jesus in the Gospel a parable about a fig tree not bearing any fruit and the end of the vine owner's patience in waiting for it to prove its worth. Jesus offers this parable in response to a conversation around worthiness. The people are imagining that their brothers and sisters who have been persecuted and killed by the Roman authorities or those who died under a fallen tower, were somehow more deserving of their fate than those who escaped death. It is a logical route to follow, if you are righteous, God will reward you, if you are not righteous, you will perish. But Jesus disagrees with this philosophy altogether.

Jesus challenges his listeners to explain why the murdered Galileans were worse than the rest of their friends and family, or to give account for why some were crushed by the tower and others were not. In the absence of an explanation Jesus is quite clear, none are without sin, all will ultimately perish. It seems pretty harsh, but then comes the hope – unless there is repentance all will suffer the same fate. Repentance is a route out, it is the basis for hope, it is possible to undo this, but not in the way the people understood.

Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree to show that God not only asks us to be patient but is also able to be patient. We, his children, fail to bear good fruit but God, the gardener in the story, wants to give us another chance. And not just another chance to try to do better on our own, but another chance after giving us special attention, digging around with fertiliser, giving us every opportunity to grow for the next year. In the end, if there is no fruit, the result is to cut the tree down, but it will not be for want of the efforts of the gardener.

That is what grace is like in our lives. God gives us every chance, every opportunity to grow, all the attention we need. God does not abandon us, we sometimes refuse to respond to God, but our separation from God is a one-way street, we walk away from God, not the other way around. So, although there can be no mistaking the scripture teaching us that not all will come to glory and life everlasting, we must never imagine that we can know who that will affect and how. To imagine that good comes to the righteous and bad to the unrighteous is a dangerous process to follow. Prosperity gospel teaching has grown out of this, but it is a poor measure. The measure of our righteousness and right relationship with God is clearly stated by Jesus, it is all about the fruit we bear.

We cannot affect the fruit others bear, we can only work on our own, and we know what the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives will look like, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. They are each bound up with one another, an impatient response is also not very joyful, kind or loving, equally to fail to exercise self-control will result in not a very gentle or peaceful outcome. We are called by God to strive for this always, we will fail and fall down but our hope remains in the gardener who by grace doesn't give up on us, but rather keeps tending us that we might grow and flourish in this life and in the world to come.