

THE FIG TREE. (Read Luke 13: 1-9)



"The Vine Dresser and the Fig Tree" by James Tissot (1836-1902)

A number of folks visit Jesus and they are full of the recent news of local tragic incidents which, everyone was talking about. Pontius Pilate had recently slaughtered a group of Galileans and they were killed during the middle of their sacrifices, mingling the blood of those killed with the blood of sacrificial lambs. The second tragedy on their minds, was the tower in Siloam which collapsed and fell upon a group of people and resulted in eighteen fatalities.

And so the folks visiting Jesus, with these recent tragedies in mind, ask of him a question which, I feel sure we all ask from time to time. Why do these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering?

The response from Jesus was very surprising because he told them a story about a fig tree, but first, he dealt with the expectations of the group who already thought they themselves knew the answer. They clearly assumed, the long held view, that people suffer because they are sinful. Surely, they thought, bad things happen to bad people.

Sometimes I hear similar views from people today. I've often heard it said that, "God is testing and refining your character through this tragedy." Or, even worse, "The Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear." Or, "nothing happens outside of God's perfect plan." This is just muddle-headed thinking. Even worse, those who hold such views prevent themselves from feelings of true empathy or compassion for those who suffer. We do need to recognize our common lot, our common suffering, our common brokenness, our common humanity.

Jesus could clearly see from the group of visitors that they believed in a 'them' and 'us' world. They are sinful, whereas we are pious and God-fearing. Jesus knew this to be wrong and he knew that in this world it is often the greatest saints that have to suffer the most. Individuals should not be blamed when things go very wrong, as it is often through no fault of theirs that a catastrophe has happened. But, he did expect nations to repent and said so. Jesus knew that if Jews continued with their intrigues, their rebellions, their political ambitions, then they were heading for national suicide. This happened to the Jews in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and forced the Jews out of their own country.

Jesus knew if the Jews continued to seek an earthly kingdom and rejected the kingdom of God, they would come to only one end. I suppose Jesus is saying to them, "You are asking the wrong questions. You're losing your life in order to save it. Start over again and ask a better question."

What is the better question?

If asking 'Why?' won't get us anywhere, what kind of question will? In typical fashion, Jesus addresses the problem with a story.

A landowner had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, Jesus tells his listeners. One day, the landowner went looking for fruit on the tree, and found none. Incensed, he confronted his gardener: "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree," he said, "and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?" But the gardener begged his employer for more time: "Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." In other words - give it one more chance!

What an odd story to tell at such a moment! What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate's killing spree, or with the massive technological failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? What is Jesus saying?

Well, for starters, he's saying, "Engage in story rather than platitude." Platitudes are flat. Formulas are reductive. Theories don't heal. And questions that call for shallow answers aren't worth

asking in the face of tragedy. But stories? Stories open up possibility. Stories include, unmake, and transform us. Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Okay, sit down, let me tell you about a fig tree...

This story invites all of us to ask questions of ourselves. Questions like:-

In what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty? Wallowing in futility and despair? Pronouncing judgments I have no right to pronounce? Am I prone to look for waste, loss, and scarcity in the world — or for potential and possibility? Where in my life — or in the lives of others — have I prematurely called it quits, saying, “There’s no life here worth cultivating. Cut it down.”

In what ways am I like the fig tree? Un-enlivened? Un-nourished? Unable or unwilling to nourish others? In what ways do I feel helpless or hopeless? Ignored or dismissed? What kinds of tending would it take to bring me back to life? Am I willing to receive such intimate, consequential care? Will I consent to change? Might I dare to flourish in a world where I have thus far been invisible?

In what ways am I like the gardener? Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus’s invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Where do I see life where others see death? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control? Am I brave enough to sacrifice time, effort, love, and hope into this tree — this

relationship, this cause, this tragedy, this injustice — with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?

Why hasn't the fig tree produced fruit yet? Well - here's the manure, and here's a spade — get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Well - go weep with someone who's weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things. Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

In short: imagine a deeper story. Ask a better question. Live a better answer. Do it now. Why? Because there is no "us" and "them." Because there are no guarantees. Because all of us are beloved, all of us are perishing, and all of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener. Ask a better question. Do it now and enable others to have a second chance.

Inspired by William Barclay, Paula Gooder and Debie Thomas