

Thirsty in the Desert

I am sure that many of you here this morning enjoy gardening. I love gardening. I could sit and watch someone gardening for hours! I have always tried to have a nice garden and at times I have succeeded. There was one sticking point. My theory was that if a plant couldn't survive without being hosed for hours every week, then it wasn't up to being in my garden. They had to be as drought proof as a rock in the desert.

Thirst is a common word in scripture, either in its true meaning or as a metaphor for spiritual emptiness or the search for faith. Even on the cross, although he spoke very little, Jesus did say he was thirsty. We are in the season of Lent which recognises Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. There is no doubt he would have been thirsty there. People die of thirst in deserts. I'd like us to consider the concept of thirst that this parable of the fruitless tree tells us about our faith.

Think about thirst. We often get thirsty and we can't survive without water for more than a couple of days. I have never been life-threateningly thirsty but maybe some of you have. I looked up what happens when someone dies of thirst. It is not an easy way to die as our systems close down one by one.

I was intrigued by the parable of the non-bearing fig tree that Jesus told. The story seems unfinished. The context of the parable is this: Jesus had been talking to a crowd and some in the crowd asked him about an atrocity that Pilate had committed by killing some Galileans and mixed their blood with the sacrifices they had made. It would seem that they were asking if the Galileans were punished by God in this manner. Jesus made it quite clear that this was not the case. It is common even today to blame victims for the disasters that come upon them. You've heard it: He was looking for trouble, or She was asking for that. See how she dresses! No one should be exonerated of a crime or any form of cruelty because someone else was vulnerable, even if that person, the intended victim, has placed themselves in jeopardy. However, that is an aside to my reflection – just as it seems it was to Jesus. He then told them the parable of the fruitless fig tree. Are the two stories related? I am sure that they must be, placed side by side in the gospel as they are. What then is this parable telling us?

I once had a mulberry tree. It was a beautiful tree, roundly shaped with nicely

shaped branches and so popular in silkworm season with the local children who could replenish their silkworm food supplies daily. It had been in our garden for several years but had never borne fruit. I thought it was time that it did. Otherwise it was taking the place of something better. So I thought that I would take the example of our now King Charles III who, as Prince Charles had announced to the world that he talked to his plants in his garden. So I said to the tree, If you don't bear fruit next year, you are coming out!

What do you think happened in the next year? Did my tree bear fruit? Yes it did. That following year I picked the mulberries from my tree and I ate both of them. That's right. It bore two mulberries. The tree came out, not for being fruitless but for the sheer impertinence of producing only two mulberries. We don't know what happened to the tree in Jesus' story so that might not be the point of the story.

What then is the point of the parable? I think that the point of this parable is in the last comment by the vineyard worker: Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down. He doesn't mention it but the digging and fertilising only works when the plant is watered. If it was thirsty, the man would take care of that.

Jesus had just made this statement to the crowd: Unless you repent, you too will perish. The parable was a second warning: Respond to what God has done for you, repent of your sins, take up your cross daily, preach the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth - or its all over for you. I'm not going into what "perish" might mean in this context. There have been theologians and philosophers who have debated that issue for centuries and I'm not going to get involved in that issue right now. One thing I know about parables is this, that you cannot take them to extreme meanings. There is normally one clear meaning and I believe that the lesson of this parable is: It's up to every individual to make their decision to follow Christ. There is one religion that believes that they can trace their ancestors and having found out who they were, they can have them baptised into their faith long after they have died. Another one used to believe that you could pay money so your relatives or friends who had already passed on could be bought into faith. In the parable it was clearly up to the fig tree to bear fruit otherwise it was out.

So what? What has that got to do with us? This is where the other main character in the parable comes into play. There is the man who took care of the vineyard. He keeps that vineyard working profitably for the owner, his master. Obviously he has been doing his job as the master was not concerned about the rest of his orchard, just this one recalcitrant fig tree. The man knew what to do for this tree because he did it to all the others.

Our job then, is the care for the vineyard, we tend all the vines and trees in our own orchard, that is we represent God to all people, we care for them, we provide everything they need to bring them to a relationship with God. We provide a welcoming place for worship, we provide pastoral care, we provide opportunities for service, we encourage and nurture their faith. Notice that it is not the worker in the garden who will remove the tree. He is not the judge of the tree. He says to his master: If it bears no fruit then cut it down. The owner had the task of culling the tree. I was rather intrigued about the letter to the Corinthians we heard earlier. Paul was listing all the sins of the people in Corinth which someone called Chloe had told him all about. How would we feel to receive a letter like that?

My wife and I met a young man at once up in Queensland. He told us of the last church service he took back home in Victoria before he ventured into the wilderness of Queensland. He said that he had named people in the congregation and told them publicly what their individual sins were. We were, well – I think gobsmacked is the only word that describes our reaction. Does God ask us to do that? There could well be times that a person might need to be told where they are going wrong but generally, people know their own failings even if they don't admit it. I cannot recall one incident when I had confronted a student with what they had done wrong and that student claimed that they were not doing wrong. They might have denied or tried to justify or blame someone else but they knew right from wrong.

What do we learn from these words of Jesus? Our job is to tend the orchard. Jesus showed us how. He was aware of wrong-doing, he understood people sinned but he showed them the alternative. He was not bitter, but always loving. He even said of those who put him to death: Forgive them. They don't know what they are doing. He brought living water for us to drink to quench our thirst for redemption, for salvation, for everything that puts meaning into our lives. To him be praise and thanksgiving for ever. Amen.