

## 11 March 2007

Isaiah 55:1-9. Seek the Lord  
1 Corinthians 10:1-13. Behaviour  
Luke 13:1-9. Fig tree, manure, second chance.

It's good to be here. It was music and liturgy that seduced me as a teenager from rural Methodism to the CoE, and it was my formative years as organ student and choral scholar at Carlisle cathedral that infected me with a love for cathedral music, that will not let me go, so for me to be here is a kind of homecoming.

Before I start on the meat of the sermon, then, I'd like to thank several people.

- First, my boss David Truby for suggesting this attachment and making it happen, and indeed for suggesting that I ask Nicholas if I might sing services here from time to time.
- So then to Nicholas himself, for all that he has shown me and shared with me – long may this continue.
- And then also thanks to Elaine, Andie, the musicians, vergers and yourselves for receiving me and welcoming me, and showing and teaching me.

So now to business.

Last week, Nicholas condemned the readings as unpreachable on, and settled instead for the psalm. It strikes me today that there are several sermons to be had from the readings, with at least two from the gospel.

The first half is the kind of text that should be wheeled out when people say that some nasty accident was God's judgement on the victim. Luke tells us that there's nothing about the mode of anyone's death that speaks of God's judgement. Rather, the point is that life is unpredictable – tragedies occur, in this case brought about by an oppressive governor – but they say nothing about God. As that well known theologian Homer Simpson did say when comforting Lisa once, it's just stuff that happens. The text does tell us that in view of the unpredictability of life we should examine our own lives and rethink our attitudes so that we are ready for the end when it comes, and we never know the moment.

Rethinking attitudes is, of course, repentance and it's what the second half of the gospel is about. I don't know exactly what a fig tree is doing in a vineyard, but I assume that it represents you and me, and it's comforting that we are not to be rejected just because we don't bear fruit the first time round. There is another chance.

Now, one of the things that speaks very loudly about Jesus' teaching is its psychological authenticity, pure wisdom. For example,

- We are to be like children
- We need to reject the ties of family – not fall out with them, just not be dependent on them
  - This freedom from attachments is Buddhist

And today's gospel gives us more authentic psychology. Let's see how.

A great deal of Holy Scripture tells us that the Christian message is one of new beginnings, second chances, but this parable tells us that the second chance is fuelled by

- restricting the roots and
- covering them with manure.

So first of all, restricting the roots.

This could be like taking time out, separate, isolated from the busyness of daily life, like Jesus in the desert. Time to reflect, not to escape the world, but for refreshment the better to engage with it. This Cathedral attachment for me has been exactly such a time.

And then there's the manure

It came as a great relief to me to read in a commentary that Jesus might have been joking, that his sense of humour might have tended to the scatological. Those that know me will understand how deeply reassuring I find that possibility. I've spent 30 years earning my keep by teaching anatomy, with my hand in body parts that other hands don't reach, and of course any of you involved in University politics will know how important it is to be able to dodge flying manure, and in the villages of the Wirksworth MMA, dodging manure has once again become important to me as I travel about. My life in fact seems to revolve around it.

Manure is the product of digestion, the residue of what we take in, and then stands for a while maturing. Manure is a fertilizer. The baobab tree needs Elephant dung for germination. Rowan berries and others need to go through the gut of a bird to help them germinate. In psychological terms, you might say manure in this story can represent the residue of our experiences, good and bad.

Perhaps we as Christians should take the time to use the residue, the lessons, of our experiences and learn from them, allowing them to fertilize growth within us. We might, in the words of the BCP, mark, learn and inwardly digest our experiences, like a second digestion after regurgitation.

Using our experiences in this way we might be able to shed old ways of doing things, old ways of thinking, when we see that they have become unnecessary and possibly counterproductive. It is like a snake shedding its old skin as it grows, the pupation of larva to adult, of caterpillar to butterfly.

This shedding of old ways is what giving up something for Lent is all about. Not, I suggest, giving up something we like just to gorge ourselves on it at Easter – there's no point in making ourselves miserable. I'm not giving up chocolate, or crisps, and certainly not gin. Lent has nothing to do with being gloomy. It's surely about giving up what we no longer need. If I really want to emulate Our Lord's time in the desert, give up unwanted attitudes that tether me to old ways of thinking.

If you want to do something really productive – and we all, every one of us, need to do something like this, I'd suggest that we all try to see ourselves as others see us. And then try to shed the attitude or behaviour that most shocks us when we so see ourselves. If we imagine that there's nothing to get rid of, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

This is penitence, turning in a new direction, repentance, transformation, metamorphosis (spiritual and biological), metanoia. Lovely words, lovely images. Read William Blake's poetry. It is the road leading to humility – nothing to do with being ever so humble, but having a right understanding of who you are before God, of knowing your weaknesses, and strengths, and whence they come. You might think so much self-examination to be selfish, but surely that depends on your intention. And anyway, Isaac the Syrian (7th century born Arabian Gulf, Bishop Nineveh) held that it was a spiritual gift from God for us to perceive our sins.

And the point of all this, this manuring the plant?

- It might give us access to deepest needs and deepest desires, reaching those parts of our souls that nothing else can reach.
- It can enable us to cleanse the temples full of rubbish inside us.
- It can allow us access to the secret garden within, pulling aside the ivy covered door, so that we can reach the divine core, allowing the divine seed within us to germinate.

There is a rather wonderful poem that talks of exactly this, and the last two verses might be known to the choristers. It's by C H Sorley and was written when he was 20, just months before he was killed at the Battle of Loos in Belgium in 1915.

CH Sorley 1915

FROM morn to midnight, all day through,  
I laugh and play as others do,  
I sin and chatter, just the same  
As others with a different name.

And all year long upon the stage,  
I dance and tumble and do rage  
So vehemently, I scarcely see  
The inner and eternal me.

I have a temple I do not  
Visit, a heart I have forgot,  
A self that I have never met,  
A secret shrine—and yet, and yet

This sanctuary of my soul  
Unwitting I keep white and whole,  
Unlatched and lit, if Thou should'st care

To enter or to tarry there.

With parted lips and outstretched hands  
And listening ears Thy servant stands,  
Call Thou early, call Thou late,  
To Thy great service dedicate.

Such wisdom from a 20-year old.

I suggest to you that we use Lent to reflect on our experiences and learn from them, to open the doors of that inner temple we have not visited, the doors of that sanctuary of our soul, allowing light from the divine core to flood out, filling our new skins.

George Herbert described Lent as a feast, and so it is. It is a feast of growth – growth that involves destruction before creation, and our own inner journey of the cross. It is painful to recall, reflect, renew. Death and destruction is a prerequisite of resurrection, rebirth, regeneration: indeed, a second regeneration by God is what Isaac the Syrian called repentance.

The prize will be such that when we look in a mirror we will see not so much an image as if through a glass darkly, but we'll see with unveiled faces, the glory of the Lord reflected to us, and we too may be transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Amen