

Lent 3: GROW OR GO!

Luke 13:6-9 [MW19-12]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 24 March 2019

That parable we've just heard – I've experienced that, been on both sides of it

- we bought a plum tree for the house in Mangawhai
planted it carefully, with fresh soil mix and fertiliser
- we watered it, lovingly tended it
and watched with joy as the leaves unfurled and blossoms bloomed
- but then the leaves started to change
the little tree turned brown, withered, dried up
and was not looking too healthy at all

So we thought, may be it's in the wrong place

- so we carefully dug it up and planted it in a big pot, on its own
with fresh soil and fertiliser
- and put it in a place not too hot, not too cold, out of the wind
watered it and tended it
- and continued to water it and tend it, even after it looked dried up and gone
but it was no good
and our poor plum tree ended up going on the rubbish heap

I have had the opposite experience too though

- when we went overseas for my previous sabbatical
our son looked after our house
- we asked him to look after our trees too
we don't know what, if anything, happened
but our kowhai tree turned up its toes and was brown and gone
- our son was really unhappy this happened under his care
so he bought a new tree for us

However the tree that looked very dead we put in a tub, on its own

- watered it, weeded it ... and you know what ... it sprang back to life!
and now sits in that very tub in our front yard

Sometimes you put a lot of resources, time, effort into something

- and it grows
... and then again sometimes it doesn't
- just like that parable

Now some scholars think Jesus in that parable was referring to the Jews, the 'people of God'

- the Lord God had put so much into having a relationship with them
so much into communicating with them, especially through the prophets
and then in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ
but as a people they seemed not to have responded
- Jesus had come to give them the opportunity to turn around, to repent
to follow the way of the Lord, to respond to the Good News
- this is kind of like their 'last chance'
if they do not respond positively they will be cut off, excluded
it will be a disaster all round
- and yes, you can certainly see that in the parable

Here's the thing with parables though

- parables do not have just one "meaning"
an explanation and application that is nice and neat
- parables give us a glimpse of God's kingdom
a perspective, direction, challenge, encouragement
- and we see all that in this very brief parable
in fact I believe that there are three ways to look at this parable this morning ...

At this particular time, the third Sunday of Lent, we could see it as a parable for Lent

- Lent is the traditional time to have an honest look at ourselves
to be as clear and objective as possible in appraising
how we are doing as followers of Jesus
- because as a follower of Jesus there is no middle ground
we are like the fig tree in the parable: either we are growing and producing fruit
or we are not growing and going backwards - dying to put it bluntly

The parable highlights that there is no comfortable middle ground

- you are either growing, like my kowhai tree
or you are going, like my plum tree ... which ended up on the rubbish heap
- to use, if you will excuse me, a rather graphic example:
you can't be a little bit pregnant – you either are or you aren't
- you are either growing/living, or you are going/dying

A second way to view this parable, is to locate ourselves in it

- where are you in the parable???
- are you like the vineyard owner, annoyed, frustrated, out of patience ... ?
- or are you like the gardener, willing to give another chance and gently care ... ?
or perhaps you are like that fig tree, not growing and producing as you could ... ?

You might like to take some time later today or during the coming week

- and reflect on this
pray, consider, and allow the Holy Spirit to work with you and through you
- if you are like that vineyard owner
where might you need to be more patient
and allow time and space for possible growth and change and improvement
- if you are like that gardener
what project, situation, person
might you be being encouraged to give time and care to
- if you are like that fig tree
allow yourself to be fertilised, nurtured, cared for
be refreshed and get growing again

And the third way is, I would suggest, our calling as followers of Jesus individually

- and collectively as the church
for we are to be like the gardener in the parable
gently digging the soil, adding fertiliser, nurturing, watering and weeding
- sometimes people and society might be quick to write someone off
label them as no good, no hoppers, not worth the effort
- we are to give them that 'one more chance'

Let's be honest

- there is not always, may be even not often, going to be a “happy ever after” ending but we are to make the effort, like the gardener
- sure the logical, reasonable, common sense thing to do is to write off the person or cause or situation: to finish it
- but we are called to make the effort

Sometimes it will be like my plum tree

- you make a huge effort and it still dies
- and sometimes it will be like my kowhai tree and spring back to life
- same effort, same care different result

Which I guess means the result is not in our hands

- but the effort is the care is
- and that is what we are called to give

This Lent – we are almost halfway through – so perhaps it's not too much to ask

- this Lent I invite you to be the gardener in the parable: there will be in your home, your neighbourhood, your community the place where you work
- one person or situation that is being, or is about to be, “written off” I challenge you, invite you, encourage you to dig around, fertilise, water, nurture for the remaining weeks of Lent
- and, who knows ... ???

I'm going to conclude by reading a poem/reflection by Joy Cowley

- followed by some silence and a prayer

“Growth” by Joy Cowley
from Come and See, p.56

*I thank you, bountiful Sower,
that you do not choose good soil alone.
You cast your abundant blessings
over the entire landscape of existence,
knowing that conditions can change
and barren soil may become fertile ground.*

*My old hard paths of judgmental thought
have become softened by a rain of tears
and are ready for new growth.*

*My stony places have small patches
of rich soil that are waiting
to receive the seed of truth.*

*And last year's crop of thistles
has mouldered down to a compost
that will grow strong plants
and a good crop of fruit.*

*I am so grateful, bountiful Sower,
that my growth does not depend
on my unstable earthly condition,
but on your endless abundant giving.*

Silence for reflection

Prayer