

### Third Sunday of Lent

I am only a small-time gardener. I have no fig trees to dig around and to manure and water. I am trying to get a few winter vegetables established with mixed success. My lettuces are doing well. But I have found that the only carrot seeds that have sprouted are the ones that I covered with a board to keep them moist. I can't remember who told me that trick.

The parable about the fig tree comes after Jesus had been told about the Galileans who had been killed by Pilate while they were offering sacrifice to God. It was pretty upsetting news. But Jesus uses the opportunity to ask those who brought the news if they thought that the people killed were any bigger sinners than they were. It was widely held that disasters and sudden death were a punishment for sin. Jesus doesn't enter into this argument here, but recalls another recent disaster to remind his hearers that death and God's judgement could be just around the corner for any one of them. They needed to be ready for death by repenting of their sins. "Unless you repent you will all perish as they did."

But the parable of the fig tree that follows brings us back to the patience and understanding that God has for us sinners. It helps us remember that Jesus is like the man who looked after the fig tree in the parable. Even though it had not been producing fruit for three years the man

who cared for it pleaded to give it one more chance. He offers to dig round it to loosen the soil around its roots, and to give it some of the best chicken manure that he could find and to water it generously. If it didn't produce any fruit after all that then it could be cut down.

Giving the fig tree another chance to produce fruit could be seen as an expression of God's mercy towards us. But the call to produce fruit can be a timely reminder of what repentance is. When we become aware of things in our lives that need to change it is not enough just to stop the wrong thing we were doing. Repentance calls for a change of heart. A change of heart calls us to seek a new way of cooperating with God's love. When we cooperate with God's love then we will produce good fruit. But that fruit might come slowly. And it might need some thoughtful gardening. What that gardening will look like will be up to each of us. Every plant needs food and water. What nourishes us and helps us to grow? What do we take delight in? Who are the people who challenge us and encourage us to keep looking beyond our selfish needs? Do we listen for the encouragement that Jesus may wish to give us?

Most plants need plenty of light. Where does the light we need come from? Have we found something to read or listen to that offers us some light for the journey that we are making as disciples of Jesus? Perhaps we could

pick up one of the Encyclicals of Pope Francis. We might choose to reread *Laudato Si* or *The Joy of Love* or *Fratelli Tutti*. They are all freely available on the web. Do we take time to pray with the Scriptures? Are we open minded enough to let other people of faith enlighten us?

Many plants need regular pruning. What are we willing to let go of so that we can grow stronger in God's life? Have our lives become cluttered up with things that distract us from what is important? When plants have been in the same pot for a long time, they usually get root bound. They may be alive, but they don't grow. Maybe we are like them. Maybe we need to be re-potted or put out into a new garden bed. Is there something new that I could experience that will give me new life? Perhaps I have been invited to make a retreat or join a prayer group? Maybe I could become a volunteer at Vinnies or with another group? Perhaps I am being called to some ministry within the Church community?

When we experience God's presence and know the love and forgiveness of God in a new way, we should not be surprised that we are called to action. Our reading today from the Book of Exodus tells us what happened when Moses met God. Moses was drawn to that burning bush and from the bush God spoke to him. The God who had called Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to take up the land that

God had promised them was now asking Moses to lead his people back to that land. God revealed his name to Moses to assure him that the God who is, will be with him in the mission that he had given him.

God assures us that he will be with us in everything that he asks of us. God will make possible the change of heart that he calls us to make. God will be with us as we seek out the new ways that we can serve Him. God's life will grow the fruit that we are called to bear. God's love will ripen it and sweeten it.