

## Cork Scripture Group



***Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.***

Psalm 119:105

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### **Barren and Budding: Growing Hope – The Fig Tree Parables**

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There are over 800 species of fig trees *Ficus* in the world. They are native throughout the tropical world and are one of the first trees cultivated by humans dating back to 9400BCE. They have been considered sacred trees in many cultures. In ancient Egypt *ficus sycamorus* was associated with the earth goddess Hathor and was known as the tree of life. In India Buddha achieved enlightenment under a Bodhi tree *ficus religiosa*. In the book of Deuteronomy figs are one of the seven crops which symbolise fertile land:

“The Lord your God is bringing you to a good land... a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing.” (Deut8:7-8)

There are mentions of fig trees in Scripture in both Old and New Testament from Genesis to Revelations. The fig tree is the only species named as having been in the garden that God planted for Adam and Eve. We know of the tree of life in centre of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen2:8-9). Adam and Eve ate from the tree that had been forbidden to them and we read that they became aware of their nakedness and sewed fig leaves together to fashion loin cloths (Gen3:7). The images of destruction in Revelations tell that “the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale” (Rev6:13).

Throughout Scripture the fig tree becomes a symbol for prosperity, wellbeing and security: “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, All of them under their vines and fig trees” (1Kings4:25). This biblical image was recently evoked by the American poet Amanda Gorman in her poem ‘The Hill We Climb’, at the inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden. Exile and wandering feature a lot in Israel’s history; this has been linked to the people being punished, for having turned away from God and his covenant; so sitting under one’s own fig tree in peace and prosperity is a sign of God’s blessing and protection.

The fig tree can be a metaphor for Israel itself, both physically and spiritually. It is somewhat of a botanical barometer for the nation’s relationship with God in the Old Testament, barren and bare in times of punishment and fertile and flourishing in times of restoration.

“For a nation has invaded my land... It has laid waste my vines and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white” (Joel1:7-8).

“Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel, like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your ancestors” (Hosea9:10).

Jesus, as an observant Jew, would have grown up with these traditions and would have been familiar with the sentiment of Habakkuk:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation” (Hab3:17).

It takes three to five years approx. for a fig tree to bear fruit and it is vulnerable to drought and frost until it is mature. Figs take time and nurture to cultivate them. It takes knowledge and patience to bring the tree to maturity and so reap a rich harvest of fruit. In Israel fig trees produce more than one crop a year, the early crop around Passover in the springtime and again around September, producing the bigger crop with the juiciest fruit near the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah (Feast of Trumpets), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles). The fig tree is an integral part of the rhythm of the seasons both natural and religious in the Jewish tradition. We bear all of this in mind as we return to the parables.

### **The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk13:1-9)**

This story is unique to Luke’s gospel. Traditionally it is explained as follows: you and I (or the people of Israel) are the fig tree that is not bearing fruit, God the Father is the owner of the vineyard looking for it to yield a good harvest of fruit, to live as he intended for it to, Jesus during his years of ministry is seen as the gardener with the responsibility of tending the fruit as the owner would want and getting the best yield from it. This is a good interpretation. God has planted us and given all the right conditions for growth and yet we do not bear fruit for him. Jesus is the gardener the one who is close to the soil and the tree, who understands that the tree may not fare well on its own, but with care and nurture can flourish and be pleasing to the owner. He takes responsibility for the tree, asking for more time to save it, but ultimately will do as the owner asks and will cut it down if it remains barren. The tree will be given another chance. Jesus does not explain this parable in the Gospel which is why I have included the lead up to it in verses 1-5. The key to understanding may be “... but unless you repent you will perish as they did.”

Who perished and why? In verse 1 Jesus was told about some Galileans who were killed in the temple by order of Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, their blood mingling with that of their sacrifices. Jesus asks what seems like a strange question to us “do you think that

these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" It may seem to those who told Jesus this news that these people were killed because somehow their sacrifice was unacceptable to God. This is the Deuteronomic understanding that God blesses and rewards goodness and punishes evil. Jesus then mentions 18 who were killed when a building collapsed on them and asks, "do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others that lived in Jerusalem?" Jesus' answer to both questions is "No, I tell you" These unfortunate people were victims of brutish Roman rule which regularly inflicted violence on the population to keep them fearfully in line, even to the point of killing Jews in the temple. Those killed by the building collapse were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We could look on these events as bad things happening to good people. Their deaths serve no purpose and make no sense. So, what does Jesus want us to learn when he says, "but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish"? He wants the people to repent, to turn back to God to live in a meaningful way, to be reconciled, to grow and change for the better, so that their lives and ultimately their deaths too would have meaning. What Jesus seeks from them is understood best by the Greek term 'metanoia', this is a complete transformative change of heart and mind, a spiritual conversion which will completely change their way of living in relationship to God and each other; tapping into all the agricultural and religious knowledge of his listeners regarding fig trees, Jesus then goes on to illustrate this with the parable of the barren fig tree.

This is a challenging story. It acknowledges the random nature of fortune or misfortune in life. It calls us to look at our lives deeply and to live them in a way that pleases God and gives us meaning; to bear fruit in the world, to live up to our potential both as human beings and as believers. We also need to realise that not doing so has consequences. There is cause for hope however as Jesus offers second chances and mediates on our behalf. We can do no more or no less for one another. Lent is the time to tend to our fig tree, the season of second chances, of dying to the old and rising anew at Easter.

### **The Parable of the Budding Fig Tree (Lk21:25-33)**

This parable is set in the context of change, of the familiar passing away and a new order being established. Chapter 21 begins with the poor widow giving all that she had for the temple offering and Jesus goes on to foretell the destruction of the temple. The disciples asked when it would happen and what signs there would be. Jesus warns them that there would be a time of waiting, of testing and persecution. The world would appear to be in turmoil and people would be afraid. The Son of man would come "in a cloud with great power and great glory". First century Jews would have understood this to be the fulfilment of the prophesy in Daniel 7:

"As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came before the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples and nations and languages should

serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (Dan7:13-14)

In Daniel 7 the ‘Son of man’ comes to the Ancient One from earth to heaven, vindicated after suffering. This prophecy in Daniel is presented from the perspective of heaven and not earth. (see NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p361)

In Luke 20 Jesus was at loggerheads with the temple leaders who questioned his authority to teach. In the context of Luke 21:25-28 the prophecy “is probably best understood as a promise that, when the Jerusalem that had opposed Jesus’ message was overthrown, this would be the vindication of Jesus and his people, the sign that he had been enthroned at his Father’s side in heaven.” (Tom Wright, *For Everyone Bible Study Guides Luke*, p124, SPCK,2011).

So too, people know when the fig tree and others begin to bud and sprout leaves that the season is changing, and summer is getting near. When Jesus’ disciples see all the turmoil and change in the world then they should read the signs and know that the Kingdom of God is near. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

There are echoes of Isaiah here:

“The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” (Is40:7-8)

Jesus promises that his words will last. There is truth in his teaching. There is power in that truth. His promises to his disciples are real. The words of Jesus are our source of hope. Which words? All of them.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk4:21)

“Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people” (Lk5:10)

“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Lk5:32)

“Your sins are forgiven”, “Your faith has saved you” (Lk7:48,50)

“This is my body, which is given for you”, “this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Lk22:19,20)

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43)

“you are witnesses of these things. And see I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk24:49)

Jesus would suffer and die and rise again and his followers would become people of ‘Parousia’ where they looked forward to his return in glory. Initially, as is evident from Acts of the Apostles and St Paul’s teachings, they expected Jesus to return before their own

generation had passed away, and as the generations have passed, we still 'wait in joyful hope', believing that Jesus' words are true and his promises real.

The signs of our times are troubling; war and shortages of resources are a never-ending scourge to the world. Religious persecution of people of all faiths is on the rise all over the world, threats to the stability of our democracies are on the rise, the global pandemic has shut us off from friends and loved ones and has us living in fear, millions have died around the world and so many are mourning their loss. The world today seems a far cry from the Kingdom of God envisaged and promised us by Jesus. In my schooldays one of our religion textbooks was *Workers for the Kingdom*. Aged 11, I remember being amazed that Jesus had a job for me to do but was happy to try to get the work done. We try and we fail, and we try again, sometimes we succeed. Jesus has promised he is with us in all our efforts. He shoulders the yoke with us, and we are never alone. Spring is trying valiantly to push away winter as February ends; with the budding trees this Lent may we dedicate these days of preparation to 'metanoia' and to hope. Hope is patient, it takes the long view and never ever gives up.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers-

That perches in the soul-

And sings the tune without the words-

And never stops- at all –

(Emily Dickinson)

## **Bibliography**

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