24 March 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Lent
The Revd Canon Edmund Newey, The Sub Dean

In nomine…

Let me begin by reminding you of the parable Jesus tells at the end of today’s gospel: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' [The gardener] replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Hearing a parable like this, we rush to identify the different characters. Who is the vineyard owner? Who are the gardener and the fig tree? Nail them down, we think, and we’ll have the key to open the parable’s meaning. So in the case of today’s story, I guess our starting point is to see the vineyard owner as God the Father, the gardener as Jesus, God the Son, and the fig tree as us, sinful humanity. The Father wants to punish us because we have not borne fruit, but Jesus intercedes on our behalf, and, so to speak, buys us time, giving us a year’s grace to mend our ways.

You won’t have much trouble guessing that I don’t think much of that explanation. Father and Son, God and God’s Word, cannot be pitted against one another like that: we human beings are not the rope in a tug of war between Jesus and his Father.

But there’s a more basic problem with instant de-codings of parables: they simply don’t take them seriously enough as parables. If Jesus had wanted to teach simply and clearly he could have done so. That he didn’t – or didn’t always – is significant. Jesus spun yarns, he told stories. We call them parables – a term from literary criticism – but neither Jesus nor his first hearers would have thought of them as a literary form. They are simply ways of stretching our limited imaginations to make them a little less inadequate to the task of knowing God and God’s kingdom.
Jesus spoke in this way because he knew that human speech and understanding are not easy matters. Think of any situation when you want to say something that’s really important to you. It’s then, isn’t it, that it’s hardest to find the right, the most truthful, words? How does a doctor tell a patient that she has only a few weeks to live? How do you tell someone you love them without falling into clichés? Telling the truth is not an easy matter; and that’s even more so, when you are trying to speak about truth itself, the truth which is God.

In today’s first reading, the prophet Isaiah reminded us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God’s ways our ways: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, [says the Lord,] so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”. It’s because he recognized this that Jesus spoke in parables. Parables remind us of the otherness of God. They help us to see how our language and our imagination fall short, and nearly always when we read them, it is best to resist the obvious first explanation. Another way of looking at today’s parable, for example, is to see the gardener as God and the vineyard owner as us in our rush to judge. Though he sees our wrongdoing, God is ready to forgive. Unlike the hasty vineyard owner, who wants to cut down the unprofitable tree, God is patient and merciful. God’s ways, indeed, are not our ways.

Of course that, too, is only another interpretation – equally incomplete. But the whole point about parables is that they don’t have one clear meaning. They are much more like the icons of the Orthodox tradition. On the face of it these are simple little pictures. But look at them for any length of time and they remind you that the truth is much less easy to find – and much greater – than you had imagined. Pause in front of an icon, and soon you find that it is looking at you as much as you at it. The same is true of the parables of Jesus: they remind us that, if we will let it, God’s word in the Bible reads us, just as much as we read it.

Today’s gospel shows us a Jesus who is at once urgent and gracious. He comes in judgment on our sin; but he also has mercy, because he is the visible face of God, ‘whose property is always to have mercy’. In the first part of our gospel Jesus mentions the Galileans slain by Pilate in the Temple and the people killed by a falling tower at Siloam. Jewish thought at the time was clear that these people died because they were sinners. Their deaths were held to be a divine punishment for their wrongdoing. Jesus has no truck with that view. If death is God’s punishment for sin, then all of us deserve the same
fate as the victims of Pilate and the men of Siloam. Hence Jesus’s twice repeated verdict: “I tell you… unless you repent, you will all perish as they did”.

But, despite the harshness of his words, Jesus reminds us that God does not delight in judgement. It is our sin that God judges, not us. Irenaeus of Lyons, the greatest Christian thinker of the second century, said that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive”. A fig tree praises God by bearing fruit, the sun praises God by shining. And we human beings praise God by being ourselves, by being all that we have the potential to be before God. When we talk of sin, then, it is to remind us that a lot of the time, we are not fully alive. Sin is “the absence in us of the fullness of humanity”, as Herbert McCabe put it; it is the refusal to be all that we can be before God.

If you are an Evensong-goer, you will recall that in the confession we petition God for his mercy: “But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders”. “Miserable offenders” sounds, to modern ears, an abominable phrase: doing us down, making us feel frail, unworthy and unloved. But knowing that we are miserable offenders is actually the greatest human dignity. In origin, miserable means pitiable, forgivable: “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis”, “O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us”: Miserere; have mercy. In confessing that we are miserable offenders, we are confessing that, though we do wrong, God forgives us and loves us.

That is the message that we need to hear this Lent and share with our world. We are not Christians because we are better people than everyone else.

Rather, because we are Christians, we know that we are every bit as bad as other people, and therefore we pray that God in Christ can – and will – have mercy upon us.

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