

## Holy Trinity Headington Quarry Lent Sermon Series on Living Faith

### No 4 - Creating Vibrant Christian Communities

#### Luke 13:1-9 & Isaiah 55:1-11

Today's Gospel is one of those spiky readings that is both difficult to understand fully and at the same time so stark in its message that it's difficult for the sensitive souls amongst us to cope with. First we hear about Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices – and then the 18 who died when crushed by the Tower of Siloam falling on them. Both the stories are unique to Luke's Gospel and we don't really know much about what Jesus was referring to.

It has been assumed that the Galileans were rebels executed by the Romans and that the Tower of Siloam was somewhere in Jerusalem and collapsed! But we don't know where it was or anything more really. These are two tantalising glimpses of local events in Jesus' own day – but the precise details are unclear. So too is Jesus' message in the first part of the reading. However, the point becomes clearer in the parable of the barren fig tree that follows.

The landowner has a fig tree planted in his vineyard and for three years goes in search of the expected fruit but finds none. Finally he loses patience and tells the gardener to chop it down – the tree is wasting the earth's resources and giving nothing back. But the gardener pleads for one more year and promises to dig round the tree and fertilise it and the owner relents. One more year he says – but then that's it.

Jesus seems to be saying that we are in some way like the fig tree. If we do not bear fruit we are failing in our purpose in life - bearing fruit is our purpose and we can expect God to be seriously unimpressed if we don't!

It is a stark message and it seems to portray God in a harsher way than we're used to. It's a very different picture from the God in our Isaiah reading who calls us to feast at God's word and return to God for mercy and pardon.

But our Gospel reading certainly makes us stop and think! What are we doing with our lives? What fruit are we meant to be bearing? Are we like the tree that bears no fruit? Or if we are bearing fruit, could we bear more? All good questions for us in Lent – both as individuals and as a community

Today is the fourth in the sermon series based on Living Faith – the vision statement set out by Bishop John for the diocese to engage with and explore. Today our theme is '*Creating Vibrant Christian Communities*' and I'd like to start by using our Gospel reading to try and think through a bit whether we as a community here at Holy Trinity are bearing fruit as we ought – or not? And to wonder with you about how we judge how we're doing as a Christian community. If we're meant to be a vibrant community then are we vibrant enough? How can we know?

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Some things one might expect from any Christian community are the fruit of the Spirit. St Paul tells us in Galatians 5 that the fruit of the Spirit is '*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control*'. And though these qualities may not always be in evidence when a group of Christians get together – they are something to aim for!

But this list is rather tame and limited in some ways. Surely in some circumstances there's a place for righteous anger, for disquiet, sorrow – lament even, and for self-expression rather than simply self control. Christ exhibited all these in his life after all.

In the Healthy Churches handbook – a self help book for churches that is widely used in this country when churches want to take stock – the author sets out 7 marks of a healthy church. That it should

1. **Be energized by faith** - rather than just keeping things going or trying to survive
2. **Have an outward-looking focus** - with a 'whole life' rather than a 'church life' concern
3. **Be seeking to find out what God 'wants'** - discerning the Spirit's leaning rather than trying to please everyone
4. **Be facing the cost of change and growth** - rather than resisting change and avoiding failure
5. **Operate as a community** - rather than functioning as a members only club
6. **Make room for all** - being inclusive rather than exclusive
7. **Do a few things and does them well** - being focussed rather than frenetic

These are all very useful and perhaps those of you who are members of a Lent group may find it helpful to look again at the lists and talk further about where you think Holy Trinity is at measured against these 7 'marks'.

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Auditing is important and appropriate in Lent but we need to be careful not to start thinking about church too much in terms of productivity. If we go down that route – we'll be missing the point.

We could start by asking 'Are we bearing fruit?' Then move on to 'What is the quality of the fruit? Could the fruit be bigger, riper, juicier? Or should we forget about quality and just increase our yield?'

When we go down that path we tend to begin to think that being church is all about *us* and how good *we are* at achieving the outcomes of 'church'. We can lose the fundamental Christian insight that being church is not just about us – it's also, and far more importantly, about God. About God's action in calling us to take part in God's purposes and to respond to an invitation.

Our Isaiah reading today tells us about the God's call to feast on the nourishment of God's word

*'ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money come, buy and eat...Listen carefully to me and eat what is good ... delight yourselves in rich food ... listen so you may live'.*

In the passage after ours we have the well known lines

*' as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' 55:10-11*

The emphasis here is all on God's word – God's invitation to us to come and feast. And all we need to do is to respond.

This reading is just necessary when we reflect on our common life as Church as the other questions about our productivity because it speaks of the spiritual reality that underpins the rest.

God's Word is always calling out to us inviting us to relationship. And when we open our hearts and minds to God's Spirit, we are filled with God's overflowing love and bear that love onwards and outwards in our lives. We become part of God's mission of love to the world. And when we are caught up in God's mission and empowered by God's Spirit, we communicate not about ourselves but about God. We become sacraments or signposts that point to the presence and reality of God in the world.

So perhaps a better set of questions for us to consider today might be:

Does our church community help people to be drawn towards God? Does our community communicate God's love for the world? Is it sacramental - pointing beyond ourselves to God as our inspiration and our goal?

Because whatever checklists we follow, whatever marks of health a church may show, above all a Christian community needs to know and delight in its part in God's mission - its role in showing forth God's love to the world.

If that is our focus, we will continue to grow into the vibrant Christian community God is calling us to be. And we *will* bear our choicest fruit to God's glory.

Amen