

Change! Bear Fruit!

Stephen Cardinal Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1207 until 1228, was one of the most brilliant and significant English clergymen in history. He was one of the primary brokers between King John and the English barons in the negotiation of what became known as *Magna Carta*, the 1215 document that established the rights of freemen under the king and is widely considered the foundation of Western Democracy. He left behind volumes of writings including commentaries, sermons and litanies that have remained in use in churches to this day. He is also widely credited with our present system of dividing the Scriptures into chapters and verses. Some of that particular work was clearly as inspired and brilliant as any organizational system ever devised. Some of it, however, tends to obscure important patterns in the flow of Holy Writ.

I offer as example today's Lectionary Gospel passage. Coming as it does at the very beginning of Langton's thirteenth chapter division in the Gospel According to Luke, it didn't dawn on me until quite late in the week that it actually forms the ending of a discourse of Jesus that begins all the way back at the beginning of chapter 11. If we had time this morning, I'd walk you through the grand sweep of what Jesus has to say: how he begins with God's love and care for humankind, how he demonstrates that love with a healing for which he is immediately discredited as a servant of the Devil, how he points again and again towards the love of God and the necessity of living out God's justice and mercy every day, only to be confronted with anger and pettiness. If you will take the time this week to read through the two chapters leading up to these nine verses, you will wonder if anyone at all within the sound of Jesus' voice was actually listening to what he had to say. If he sounds a little testy in his reaction to those who come to him with the story about the deaths of the Galileans, he has certainly been provoked.

But actually, I don't think that Jesus' warning, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did," is simply the cranky retort of a tired and exasperated prophet. I think his response to the question about reward and punishment and his peculiar story about the fig tree are all a part of his proposition from all the way back in chapter eleven, verse thirteen: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" So let's look carefully together at what Jesus says and the situation surrounding his words. What did Jesus mean when he called on his listeners to repent and of what did he want them to repent? How would those first century Palestinians have understood the story of the fig tree in a way we might not? What impact might this story have on our lives, once we uncover these ancient truths?

Somehow, for many of us, the whole notion of repentance has become synonymous with being sorry for something, for mourning for our poor behavior or sins. "Repenting with sackcloth and ashes" is a popular term among those for whom following Christ is a cheerless, guilt-ridden existence. But in the Scriptures, repentance is only paired with "sackcloth and ashes" twice, in a teaching of Jesus quoted by both Matthew and Luke. The word "repent," however, occurs in the New Testament alone at least 60 times. The Greek word is μετανοια, to change one's mind or to turn. It is not a word of sorrowful attitude but one of action. Jesus is warning off his listeners from following a course of action that both they and the Galileans in their story have been pursuing. But what?

The story of the Galileans is unknown to any other account but a working knowledge of the situation in Roman Judaea and of the character of Pontius Pilate allows us to fill in the details.

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The Roman rule of the area we now know as Israel was never easy. There were periodic insurrections and Galilee was a hotbed of revolutionary feeling. Pilate, who quickly became known for his brutality, only made a bad situation worse. We do not know whether the Galileans in this story actually were revolutionaries or simply fit the profile but no one would have been terribly surprised that the Roman governor saw fit to have his soldiers ambush them in the Temple grounds.

At least part of what Jesus was warning his listeners against was contributing to the atmosphere of political violence that led to the death of the Galileans. Violence, even against an oppressive regime, is never a part of the Jesus way. Both Luke and Matthew tell of how Jesus prevented his disciples from using swords on his behalf even when he was being taken to his death. Instead, Jesus counseled rendering unto Caesar and offering to go a second mile with a soldier when conscripted to carry his pack for one. Jesus understood that violence would never bring security to his people. He may have had in mind the words of the Psalmist or of Isaiah, who counseled that trust in horses and chariots, military might in other words, was vain. Only the LORD God gives true security. Sadly, we know that Jesus' warning against political violence went unheeded and that most of the population of Jerusalem and thousands of other Jews did indeed perish as did the Galileans – at the swords of Roman soldiers during the final rebellion that brought about the destruction of the city and the Temple in AD 70.

But even if the Galileans killed in the Temple were innocent of insurgent intent, they were nevertheless participating in another kind of violence; another vain search for security that Jesus said had come to end. Their blood, the Scripture says, had been mingled with their sacrifice. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians of the Twentieth Century, says this about sacrifice: “The sacrificial cult was endowed with supreme political significance. It was the chief requirement for the security of the land and may be regarded as analogous to the cult of military defense in our own day. Both have their roots in the concern for security. Cease to appease the gods with offerings on the altars and their anger will strike you down. Sacrificing is a way of preventing the attack.” The prophets had spoken against meaningless adherence to sacrificial forms. Remember the words of Micah: ““With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Or think of the word of the Lord that came to Amos, brought back to the fore in our time by an American prophet, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” In making the sacrifice of his own life, Jesus forever put an end to the sacrificial system through which humanity tried to guarantee their own security by bribing God.

Jesus warned his listeners to turn away from encouraging or committing political violence. He warned his listeners to turn away from empty ritual meant to curry favor with God. He also

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warned them to turn away from the spiritual violence of scapegoating, which lies beneath their question about the Galileans. It's human nature to look at those who've fallen victim to disaster or disease and wonder what they might have done to bring such a fate upon themselves. In part, we want to be reassured that the victims are to blame so that we don't have to worry about becoming victims in the same way. If they've done something to deserve "divine punishment," then we can avoid those actions and stay safe. If they've been punished, perhaps God won't punish us. But Jesus says that God doesn't work that way. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you." In other words, don't think that because you are better somehow than these unfortunates that you are safe. You might get hit with a falling wall tomorrow as you are walking down the street. Turn away from that way of thinking to examine yourself. If your end comes tomorrow, have you lived a life pleasing to God?

In his teaching leading up to these verses, Jesus has pointed out that the time to the end may be shorter than people think. His warning echoes what some of us have been studying in Ecclesiastes on Wednesday nights, "No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind, or power over the day of death." Like the rich fool who plans to pull down his barns and build bigger ones, our lives may be demanded of us this very night. We simply cannot know. As a rather more secular prophet, Jim Morrison sang with his band, The Doors, "the future's uncertain and the end is always near." So how will we face the judgment?

If they were honest, those in the crowd around Jesus that day would have had trouble answering that question. According to the doctrines they said they espoused, they really weren't doing very well. If they had loved God with all their hearts and minds, it is hard to imagine that they would have accused Jesus of being in league with Beelzebub. If they had loved their neighbor as themselves, would they have been looking for ways to trip Jesus up as Luke tells us they were doing? Would one of them have come to Jesus looking to get him to make the first one's brother give him a bigger share of the inheritance, as we read in chapter 12? Would they have been so quick to point fingers at the victims of tragedy? Would they have been locked in deadly struggle with the Romans or would they have found a way to give God the glory in the face of what seemed like defeat? They had not been a light to the nations, as God wanted. They had not been faithful to God. They had not been fruitful.

Like the vines or the vineyard, the fig tree is often a symbol in the writings of the prophets for Israel and God's vision of the faithful relationship that God desires with God's people. When Jesus begins to speak of a fig tree planted in a vineyard, his listeners would have known he was talking about them. They would have heard in the words of the landowner God's own accusation against them. They would have thought of the words of God spoken through Isaiah: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none." A fig tree is by its nature fruitful. It does not require a great deal of tending to produce. But it draws a good deal of moisture and nutriment from the soil – in a vineyard an unproductive fig tree would be an unnecessary burden on the surrounding vines, fit for nothing but to be cut down.

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But Jesus has a surprise for them in his parable. The landowner is not given the last word. Instead, there is a humbler character, a gardener, who speaks a word of mercy and hope, forestalling the immediate destruction of the barren tree. “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.” There is a reprieve for the fig tree, a reprieve for the unfruitful people of God. But to what end?

What is it that God expects God’s people to produce? We must remember Isaiah’s vision of the vineyard – “he expected justice... righteousness...” – or Amos’ call to the people of Israel – “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” – or Micah’s question – “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Remember also that Jesus had opened this discourse in chapter 11 by pointing to the great gift that God had in mind to give to the people of Israel and to all the world – “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Now, we may ask the question, if our heavenly Father gives us the Holy Spirit, how will we be different? For the answer, we look to Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Those who heard Jesus that day had not of course heard Paul yet. But they had heard the prophets read to them again and again. They knew that Jesus was right. That is why the narrative ends here in verse nine and picks up in verse ten with a story from another day – “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.” After the story of the fig tree, the crowd must have dispersed, some in sorrow, some in confusion, to consider what they’d heard that day. They may have taken to heart Jesus’ characterization of them as a barren fig tree or they may have dismissed it in their pride. They may have seized the note of hope and grace at the end of the story and experienced a μετανοια, a change of mind; a desire to be more what God had intended them to be. But they can’t have fully appreciated Jesus’ story because that can only be done on the other side of the Cross and the Empty Tomb. They did not know that Jesus would shortly echo the words of his gardener, “*kyrie aphen auten* – Lord, let it alone” when he said, “Father, forgive them — *aphes autois*.” The Greek word for forgive is the same as the word the gardener speaks on behalf of the tree. Nor could the crowd that day have known that Jesus would shortly appear to the grieving Mary Magdalene as a gardener.

Debra Dean Murphy, Assistant Professor of Religion and Christian Education at West Virginia Wesleyan College, says it beautifully on her blog: “The cure that Jesus the patient gardener offers is radical horticulture: he will give his own life, his crucified body, as the fertilizer, the compost that will bring new life and growth. Repentance—a turning away from death toward life and wholeness—is part of this process.” To become as fruitful as God wants us to be, to truly exhibit the fruits of the Spirit and let justice, mercy and righteousness characterize our lives, we must turn away from the way of violence and toward the way of Jesus. We must disavow the search for security in politics, military might, armaments, sacrificial systems or scapegoating and allow our Heavenly Father to give us the security that only comes to a humble heart. We must experience μετανοια, turning, repentance in the way that Frederick Buechner understood it when he wrote, “To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as

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something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying, "Wow!"

It is time, my brothers and sisters, to put the brokenness of our past behind us and look into God's future for us and say, "Wow!" To return to the words of Debra Dean Murphy, "The good news is that Jesus tends the soil of broken, barren lives and brings forth life. When we gather as his body, when we bless, break, take, and eat his body, we become for a broken, barren, suffering world (Jesus)." We will come now to the Lord's Table and we will eat his body and drink his blood, the sacrifice that ends all other sacrifices, the spiritual fertilizer that allows us to be fruitful trees of God, planted by the waterside and never moving from God's way. And because we have eaten and drunk and received the Holy Spirit, we must go and share the feast of grace with our world, letting all those around us know that death and life are not meaningless accidents but are full of the glory of God and all the good gifts that our Loving Creator would share with us. Thanks be to God!