LUKE 13:1-6 Second Sunday in Lent 17.3.2019

The owner of a leafy green fruitless fig tree had expected to see fruit or at least some fig blossoms or little green figlets. But there were none. In frustration, he called for the tree to be cut down.

Perhaps the owner may have heard John Baptist fulminate “The axe is lying at the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear fruit shall be cut down” [Luke 3:9] Perhaps the owner was a novice hobby farmer. He may not have known that newly-planted fig trees have a long juvenile period, as much as four to five years before fruiting. His tree may have been younger.

Former slaver John Newton hymned “The under-gard’ner grieves, in vain his strength he spends, for heaps of useless leaves, afford him small amends; he hears the lord/ his will make known, to cut the barren fig tree down.”

But good things can happen even to an unsuspecting fig tree. It was given a second chance. With gracious intervention, the compassionate gardener held out this hope. He pleaded patience: “Axeman, spare the barren tree; don’t put it to such swift destruction. Spare it yet another year.” He promised the owner “I will till and aerate the soil, to loosen the clods around the tree roots to reduce compaction and increase the flow of moisture. Then I will fertilize with manure to improve the soil to try to promote fruiting. If I give loving attention to the tree for a year, the tree may glean years and years of prodigious production. Yet, if nothing changes in the coming year, it can be cut down.” John Newton as the gardener, hymned: “Spare it, and let me try, what farther means may do. I’ll fresh manure apply, my digging I’ii renew. Who knows but yet it fruit may yield. If not, ‘tis just it must be fell’d.” It’s a shame that, in 1800, with all this native know-how, Costa wasn’t around to give John a spot on ‘Gardening Australia.’

God could be seen as the Old Testament owner, losing patience with all who did not bear the fruit of repentance in their lives. But no. That same God so loved the world that God sent God’s son to be the new gardener of Israel. There, he dug away religious apathy and stubborn legalism, and spread the nutrient of his Word to nourish Israel’s soil and its roots. Jesus knew that time was limited, not from God above, but from the brutal Roman oppressors. He strove to help the New Israel find its way to peace with Rome or the Pilates would wreak vengeance on the innocent pilgrims and locals alike, even at their Temple prayer, as was shockingly foreshadowed earlier in today’s Gospel, and latterly, in Christchurch.

What of us? Just because we have not been cut down, we must not presume that we are bearing fruit. As the gardener gave the fig a second chance, so Jesus gives us his generous mercy. In the story, the nutrients made the difference. For us, it is the Sunday Word, the bread and wine, and the sweet togetherness of parish community, that is the ticket.

What possible reason can there be for us to pro-crastinate about such an offer. ‘Crastina’ means tomorrow; do we keep putting off our fruiting to tomorrow? That is as effectual as the hotel sign *“Free Beer Tomorrow*.” When is that actually?

The hymn-writer Anon. wrote an imitation of Newton’s *Amazing Grace*: “The tree of life, how sweet the fruit, With God as life complete. I once was dead, but now I live, Was starved, but now I eat. T’was God that brought me to the tree, With Christ himself as meat. How precious did that tree become, When I began to eat. The Lord himself is food to me, He is my life supply. He will my pure enjoyment be, None else can satisfy. I freely live his living tree, For eating is the way. To put God’s life inside of me, To live by him today.”

Yet our God is very patient with all of us fig tree people. God gives us time for daily repentance and renewal. And, repentance is the first step towards entering the realm of God. On the Day of Pentecost, people asked “What should we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” [Acts 2: 37-38]. Each day is a day of God’s grace, of God’s kindness to provide us the opportunity to bear the fruit of repentance. And, what are the joy-filled fruits of repentance? Paul tells us “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Do you want a piece of this action?

To garner these fruits requires a new consciousness of one’s shortcomings, an earnest desire to discover the truth about yourself and who you truly are, a changed way of thinking and the adoption of an entirely re-oriented self.

God could have orchestrated the Second Coming sooner. But, God, this time the Divine Gardener, gives us more time to get things right, to grow our fruitful fig-tree of life, before shouting: “Coming, ready or not!” There is a limit. Will your fruit emerge in time to thwart the axe?

The blessed vision is set before us in Scripture: “Everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig, and no one shall make them afraid. Everyone beneath the vine and fig shall live in peace and have no fear” [Micah 4,4].

There are still unproductive fig trees all around us. These are people who look fine externally, whose happy-go-lucky outside belies a deep depression, people whose bright outside camouflages a darkness within. They are all green-leaved externals, but, they are a withered fig tree, growing, but no longer producing. Pray God, they turn for help from Jesus the Good Gardener and from us.

Let me end: This Lent, how are you letting the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Divine Gardener, aerate your soil? As your Ascension parish seeks to exploit ways and means for the Holy Spirit to do what it longs to do, what limits will you set? How much can the nutrient Eucharist bear good fruit in your souls by faith with thanksgiving?

And, as the gentlest of gardeners, Peter Cundall used say, “That’s your lot for this week.” Amen.