

Lent 3 Year C

Many of you will know that I have a deep interest in cooking - how could it be otherwise for someone who has well over three hundred cookery books, many of which are frequently read like novels, from cover to cover? One thing all cooks know is that some dishes taste better the day after they are made - or even better the day after that, and that for meat (but not for fish) overnight in a marinade is better than a couple of hours. So, ragu, casserole, stew - all benefit from keeping and then reheating - as do resentment and self-righteousness - better kept until later and then re-warmed. I know all about resentment - my mother was an expert - she could keep that dish warm for decades. She always reminded me of the wives of the men who sat in the tavern getting fou, at the beginning of Burns' poem *Tam O'Shanter*, each one 'our sulky, sullen dame, gathering her brows like gathering storm, nursing her wrath to keep it warm'. Today's Gospel reading has some people trying to stir up wrath - self-righteous anger - in Jesus with a tale about the Galileans murdered by Pilate's soldiers whilst they were making sacrifices, presumably in the Temple in Jerusalem - for nowhere else was sacrifice legitimate. They were not only angry - a bitter,

exhausting emotion - but self-righteously angry - now that is sweet, it makes us feel superior - we are the good people, and they, well of course, they are the bad - inferior, despicable, and the more frequently re-reheat this dish, the more delectable it tastes. The problem for these tale tellers (Luke doesn't call them disciples) the problem is that Jesus refuses to put his spoon into their bowl. He hears the story but makes no judgement, neither condemning Pilate nor commending the Galileans; why were they in Jerusalem? Was it genuinely to offer sacrifice in the Temple or to stir up rebellion against Rome? The Galileans had form as far as rebellion was concerned, and Pilate was known to be ruthless. Instead of exploding in righteous indignation against Rome, Jesus turns the story back to the Galileans, those who were around him. 'Do you think that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' Do bad things only happen to bad people? What is the connection between sin and suffering? Or between suffering and sin? The whole of the Book of Job seeks to answer these questions - and in the end comes to the conclusion (if you can call it a conclusion) that 'I have uttered what I did not understand' and 'therefore I repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42.3&6)

We do try to make a connection between suffering and sin - how often have you heard 'what have I done to deserve this/', but Jesus doesn't make that connection here. Instead, he brings up the incident of the labourers being killed when a tower in the Jerusalem city wall collapsed, killing the workmen - was that a judgement on them? NO, Jesus tells them, BUT, that little three letter word, BUT 'unless you repent, you will perish just as they did'. He says nothing about the Romans because he doesn't want his mission to be defined by the foreign enemy - the enemy is within - those who 'trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt' (Luke 18.9). When it comes to judging sin, look first at the log in your own eye before seeking the speck in the eye of your neighbour - or your enemy.

We live in a world where everyone seems to want to blame everyone else for the ills of the world - in Western Europe Islam is a favourite target, as it is in parts of India. In the Islamic world it is secular western society. For some countries it is faith groups of any complexion, and the list can go on - homosexuals, trans people, secularists, religious fanatics, social media, popularism, consumerism. We all seem to have a stable where we

keep our high horse, waiting to ride out to do self-righteous indignant battle, for our side, of course.

But what if our side is like that fig tree - the one the vineyard owner wants to cut down? Jesus attaches this parable to stories of apparently undeserved suffering and his call to repentance - uttered twice. 'Unless you repent'. No point in putting on your battle dress, climbing on your high horse, lighting the flame under the pot of resentment and self-righteous indignation - unless you repent - unless you try harder to bear fruit. The logic of the story, of course, is that the tree that bears no fruit, the tree that is basically a waste of space, the tree that should be uprooted to make way for another tree - that tree - that useless tree - is offered another chance. Both the vineyard owner and the gardener agree that it should be offered all the help it needs to become fruitful - although in the end it is down to the tree, whether it flourishes or fails will depend on how deep its roots run in God's good earth.

This parable comes as a two-sided mirror for us - C It is no good getting on your high horse or stirring the pot of resentment or self-righteousness with God - as Job's comforters tried to do. The call this Lent is clear - repent - that is, turn around, turn

from all that keeps you and me away from a genuine relationship with God, let Him feed you through word and sacrament, so that you can bring forth the fruits of the Spirit. Those who died in the Temple and those who died beneath the falling tower had no time for repentance - so repentance isn't something you should put off until your death bed confession.

'If it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down'. Now that sounds scary! Time to look at the parable's mirror and decide which reflexion we want to see.