

Humanity and Humility

Ruthlessness and repentance. Humanity and humility. Key themes from today's readings, Key themes throughout this season of Lent.

Ruthlessness: one of the key rules of gardening – pruning, chopping, weeding, deadheading, dividing, removing the weak and sick, throwing away the plants that inhibit or crowd the others. Out go the plants that don't produce fruit or function. Out go plants that do not offer beauty or scent or pleasure or visual interest.

In today's gospel we hear the owner of a garden observes a barren fig tree. Reasonably, he orders it to be yanked out. He displays ruthlessness - a trait we so often admire in the right situations.

But the gardener displays an unexpected patience, an unexpected humanity, and suggests that the owner give the fig tree one more year.

Now, as a general rule of thumb, Jesus' parables are defined by their shocking reversals, so if we find ourselves reading one of his parables and see no unexpected behaviour, we need to re-read with our eyes, with our mind, and with our imagination more deeply engaged.

The twist in this story, and perhaps the focus for our attention is meant to be the strange behaviour of the gardener. Now remember, the gardener doesn't own the land and isn't the one who benefits most from its profit -- yet he seems to care more about the tree than the fruit, and seems more than happy to devote extra care -- when no law or custom requires it and he has nothing to gain personally from it.

He promises to break up the hard earth, aerate the ground around it, letting the roots breathe and drink and take in nourishment. He's going to put manure around it, that golden substance which is the very ground of life and fertility – and change the very soil that will nurture the fig tree.

Now, it would be crazy for the gardener to care about a tree in this way, it would be crazy for the gardener to show such patience... and that's the point.

We see in this crazy gardener a glimpse of God....

This crazy gardener who actually cares about the life of the tree...

This crazy gardener who sees this fruitless tree more as a wounded life in need of healing, rather than a waste of space in need of clearing...

But isn't that just the kind of crazy way God cares for us? Isn't that the crazy kind of love Jesus shows for us on the cross...

Picture for a moment the gardener - making manure, composting. Think about the humus - that living, breathing, potent source of energy the gardener scoops up in his hands after leaves and grasses and insects decay upon the ground. Humus is the Latin word for earth. Humanity comes from the earth (remember those evocative words from Ash Wednesday: remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return, turn away from your sin and be faithful to Christ.)

Do we see in this gardener, a reminder of creation and a picture of our creator?

And do we also see, a reminder that we are to be recreated, and a picture of Christ?

Humility is being close to the earth - earthiness, honesty.

Humanity and humility, is the way of Christ, and the way of the cross.

(And incidentally, I am also reminded of the women arriving at the tomb on Easter morning, and Mary talking to the gardener - not realising she is talking to the Christ!)

But back to today's gospel and our final word: repentance.

To repent is one of Luke's favourite verbs! The Greek verb to repent (metanoein) means to change one's mind. It refers to a 180-degree change of mind and heart. Versions of the verb "to repent" show up about fifty times in the New Testament. Half of those are in Luke and in the second volume of his work, Acts.

Lent is a good time to turn around and head toward God.

Repentance has acquired negative connotations over the years. But for Luke repentance is a positive thing.

Luke's gospel is the joyful gospel! Luke's gospel introduces us to a God who is merciful and gracious and wants more than anything to repair our relationship with God, whose heart leaps with joy when we turn Godward.

In Luke, the message is: Repent, or this is the joy you'll miss!

The poet Zaleski writes:

Repentance means, above all, a constant, patient, growing in love. It means our willingness to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit in us and to embrace fully the gift of our salvation. Repentance is the life of the Spirit within us, a life of truth and of love.

I wrote in the Link that sadly, Lent, has all too often been seen, as a morose season in which we all give up something in order to prepare ourselves for eternal life. The salvation promised and hoped for requires us turning our backs on the joys of this life and the beauties of the earth. We are encouraged to train our eyes upon heaven, forsaking time for

eternity. But is salvation really about escaping this world or rather seeing everlasting beauty in each passing moment?

One of the rules of St Benedict is :

Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die...

realising that 'preparing for death' is not turning away from things of the earth, for things of heaven. Rather, for the Christian it is preparing for 'eternal life', which means real living, abundant living, starting now. Giving the most to life and getting the most from it.'

So my prayer for all of us this Lent is that we grow in patience, with ourselves and with each other, that we grow in humility and we get deeper in touch with our humanity , that we take the time to aerate the soil and add the manure. That we take care of the things that really matter, while being taken care of ourselves.

And just as we wait patiently for the Spring, we too will wait and soon see God's fruit and God's love flourish in our lives and in the life of our parish.

Tim