

3rd Sunday of Lent cycle C

Several years ago, I happened upon one of those day-by-day calendars, one based on a TV program, and entitled “Deep Thoughts.” This question was posed as one thought for the day: “Would we be so cavalier about cutting down trees if they screamed? Probably so—if they screamed all the time, and for no apparent reason.” Ridiculous, both on the level of personified trees, and for those of us who appreciate absurdity, for the randomness of the screaming. But, what if? What if we personified the tree? What if the tree had a mind, and a will, such as we do? In a way, we are being invited to do just this with the parable that Jesus proposes in this week’s Gospel passage from Luke: the parable of the fig tree. Jesus clearly is not interested in teaching a lesson about horticulture, or cultivation; his are lessons in faith. The fig tree stands for those who refuse faith; its barrenness stands for resistance to conversion. And Jesus clearly believes that the “fig tree” is listening to his parable as he tells it.

So if the fig tree in the parable had a mind and a will, what would be going through its mind, and what would be the reasons determining its will? Why not bear fruit; why not do what fig trees were created to do? Perhaps the tree just plain and simply doesn’t like being told what to do; has no problems with bearing fruit, but doesn’t want to do it according to its creator’s design, and refuses to do it at his creator’s command. Perhaps sheer laziness: bearing fruit takes more effort than just being there, producing nothing. Perhaps it would be a matter of not wanting to share its goods: produce fruit, and then other people get to enjoy said fruit; sort of the “if I can’t enjoy it, I don’t want anyone else to enjoy it, either” attitude. And so this is the crowd of people that Jesus was encountering, and trying to warn; people who resisted God’s revelation, and who set their wills in opposition to his revelation. We live in a strange age of both strong faith, and great unfaithfulness: many worship God, and many resist God, and many who resist him do so with great vehemence. There are any number of books, unfortunately enough some of them best sellers, that purport to disprove the reasonable of faith and the very existence of God. And on the TV side of things, we have the Discovery Channel and History Channel’s on-going attacks against the foundations of Christianity and the Divinity of Christ. But why the resistance? Look to the fig tree. Because if it’s ignorance of Christ that’s at fault, then it’s an ignorance born of something more than lack of knowledge. Many resist God because of pride: they don’t want anybody, even their Creator, telling them what to do. The old “whose life is it anyway?” syndrome. When man develops an unhealthy, conceited sort of pride, he can come to resent anyone greater than he, even

God. And so many rebel against God for the express purpose of declaring that he isn't the boss of them, and that neither he nor anybody else is going to tell them what they may and may not do. The next reason why man resists God: sloth; sheer inertia. Because contrary to what some people like to believe, faith takes effort; it's more than just sitting in a chair and believing in someone. Faith takes belief, but then that belief calls us to prayer, and it calls us to good works, and it calls us to worship. Faith competes with other things for our time, and for our resources. Faith calls us to get going, and change the world; make things happen. Another reason why the tree might refuse to bear fruit: having to give up its fruit in due season. And so many people resist God because he calls us at times to renounce the goods of this world, including those things that we produce. And so, many people will disingenuously invoke skewed historical claims or cultivate some sort of doubt, when in fact it's just a matter of not wanting to deprive themselves of some thing that God might call them to renounce out of love for him, something he may ask them to leave behind in order to follow him.

So here we have the fig tree, with all of its misguided reasons for not bearing fruit. We can imagine the excuses, but what might the tree have to say when it sees the ax on its way? What if the tree didn't have the gardener to defend it, but could try to talk its way out of the impending encounter with the ax? It would probably say that it would do better, that it would start to bear fruit with the next growing season; it would promise to change if that's what it needed to do to save itself. And so too does man, when confronted with his own iniquities, like to promise God change—soon, very soon, very eventually; perhaps tomorrow; perhaps next month. Perhaps once married, perhaps once advanced in years. The parable of the fig tree is certainly a parable of God's great patience: look, he waits for years for the tree to start bearing fruit, grows impatient with it only after a ridiculous amount of time during which it could have produced, and then listens to the gardener's pleas to please give it just another growing season. The landowner isn't anxious to chop down the tree, and God is in no hurry to condemn the sinner; quite the opposite. He will delay judgment so that the sinner has the chance to repent. But he also is firm, and he also is wise; he knows when the tree will remain barren, and he knows when the sinner is not, and will not be, interested in repentance. So the parable stands also as one of God's firmness. The tree will be given more than enough chances; but if it just simply will not ever bear fruit, the tree will come down. We have the gardener to plead for us now, but he will not plead forever, and there will be no talking our way into heaven if we haven't born fruit as a Christian. Paul wrote to the Corinthians "whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall."

Redemption is not the same thing as salvation; redemption occurred when Jesus died for us, salvation occurs not when we say Jesus is Lord, but when we show that Jesus is Lord. Any of us can still fall; any of us can change our minds and our ways in either the direction towards God, or the direction away from him.

The greatest attribute of man, and what causes us to be made in God's image and likeness, is our free will and our power to choose. On Mount Horeb, God revealed himself to Moses, and he said to tell the Israelites "I AM" sent you. I AM: His nature is to exist, to choose, and to will; and this he has deigned to share with us. And so the burning bush stands as one of the great divine interventions: God revealing himself, telling us about himself, one of many times and ways in which he tried, with all diligence, to come to our rescue. But how many signs does he need to send telling us to repent; and how long will he keep on patiently sending these signs? He calls us through his Church; he invites us through various devotions to deepen our faith; he calls us make a good examination of conscience, and a good confession. He will do anything to save us, except force salvation upon us against our wills. And thus stands the fig tree: everything done to it and for it to make it produce, but eventually the signs and favors come to an end, because God knows that they are being wasted, because some choose to resist his mercy, and choose to refuse his invitation to eternal peace.

Lent reminds us that the end will come eventually for all men, and that the time we have here on earth is first and foremost not for the pursuit of pleasure, but for the pursuit of holiness and grace. God is beyond patient with man, and yet, he knows the difference between "buying time" for the sinner who will eventually choose his own greatest good, and throwing good time after bad, and giving opportunities for repentance and grace to the sinner who just is not now, and will not be, interested in achieving his Master's will. And during this time, we who claim the faith will be searched by God, just as the landowner searched the fig tree for fruit; we will be searched for faith, examined for good works, and checked for repentance. Would the landowner cut down the fig tree just because it refused to bear fruit? Eventually, if the tree was just refusing to do so because of pride or laziness or selfishness, and if it resisted all efforts to get it to produce that for which it was created.

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