

# The Fig Tree in the Garden.

I want to talk to you today, about the Fig Tree. To do so however, with any kind of integrity, will require that we filter our thinking through the mind of a Hebrew and ask our selves, "When a Hebrew hears stories about Fig Trees, what jumps into their mind? How do they react?"

It is also important to recognise that the mention of the Fig Tree in the gospel for today, comes to us by way of a parable. Indeed, to get closer to what is intended in the parable, one should go even further and recognise that within the parable the Fig Tree is framed as a metaphor.

An early step into meanings wrapped around Fig Trees will of necessity, remind us of some very memorable stories about trees. Often, biblical images embrace very imaginative writing. For instance, In Judges 9: 7-15 we read about Jothan's response to a brutal family genocide. Whilst you might want to debate exactly what Jothan is referring to with this vivid imagery, you are left in no doubt that Jothan's imagery has distant boundaries. He says:

"Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. 8 The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' 9 But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods (note the lower case to god) and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?' 10 And the trees said to the Fig Tree, 'You come and reign over us.' 11 But the Fig Tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my

sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?' 12 And the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.' 13 But the vine said to them, 'Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?' 14 Then all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come and reign over us.' 15 And the bramble said to the trees, 'If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'

Each of us here today will have experienced your own thought triggers on hearing Jothan's tree story. I did. For me, there were suddenly recalled images from Tolkien's 'Twin Towers. There is that moment when Treebeard<sup>1</sup> realises that the Ents must to go to war and attack Isengard, after he has seen the damage that Saruman has done to Fangorn Fores. I sensed the same theological cross referencing that Archbishop David Moxon also saw and shared in a widely appreciated theological response to the Lord Of The Ring.

Put simply, it seems very likely that Tolkien knew the passage from Judges 9:7-15, well.

Just as Treebeard realises the Ents must to go to war and attack Isengard, then regularly, the New Testament writers lean on the imagery of the Fig Tree and it becomes something akin to the lamppost which provides a marker and light in the Nania Chronicles.

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<sup>1</sup> Treebeard, or Fangorn in Sindarin, is a tree-giant character in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. He is an Ent and is said by Gandalf to be "the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth." He lives in the ancient Forest of Fangorn, to which he has given his name.

When New Testament writers lean on the imagery of the Fig Tree they regularly draw issues of fruitfulness; and change. Bishop Tom Wright tells us that are two ways of taking the story of the Fig Tree; both of which give a satisfactory meaning and arrive at the same point.

1. Jesus himself could be seen as the vineyard-owner. He has been coming to the Lord's garden, seeking the fruit of repentance, throughout his ministry. (We might take the 'three years' of 13:7 as an indication that Jesus' ministry had lasted that long, but it's more likely that it is simply part of the logic of the story.) So far, apart from a very few followers, who are themselves still quite muddled, he has found none: no repentance, not even in the cities where most of his mighty deeds had been done (10:13–15). He is prepared, then, to give Israel, and particularly Jerusalem, the Temple, and the ruling priests one more chance. If they still refuse, their doom will be sealed.
2. Or maybe it is God who has been coming to Israel these many years, seeking fruit. Maybe Jesus is the gardener, the servant who is now trying, as the owner's patience wears thin, to dig around and put on manure, to inject some life and health into the old plant before sentence is passed. Either way the end result is the same: 'If not, you can cut it down.' Luke's arrangement of the material from chapter 10 onwards leaves us in no doubt as to how he saw the matter: when Jerusalem fell in AD 70, it was a direct result of refusing to follow the way of peace which Jesus had urged throughout his ministry.

The passage therefore bristles with a double tension. Will Jerusalem repent and be rescued? And if, as he has been saying, Jesus expects to die himself when he goes there, how do his fate

and that of the city relate to one another? What is God up to?  
And, if we can begin to think about those questions, there are  
others for us to face ourselves. What is God up to in our world  
today? In our own lives? Are we bearing fruit for God's kingdom?<sup>2</sup>

It is that last sentence that commands our attention.

**What is God up to in our world today? In our own lives? Are we  
bearing fruit for God's kingdom?**

Tom Wright was more than happy to give words to the imagery of the  
Fig Tree and neither did he feel constrained to think in literal ways.  
The word that best describes his approach, is Figural.

Figural denotes a form of written communication which relies on  
imagery and association rather than on rational thinking and finite  
language.

Thus, to best get close to what Luke was telling us, we need to have  
the courage to be creative, or imaginative. The only restraints that  
should apply, will be the context in which Luke offers us this phrase.  
That is to say; we should read the text before and after the story  
of the Fig Tree. Any allusions inspired must synchronise with the  
biblical outline that the parable was placed in.

Tom Wright suggests that we see the vineyard owner as Jesus and  
the tree as Israel. I want to suggest a different imagery. In my

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<sup>2</sup> WRIGHT, T., Luke for Everyone (London 2004) 163-164.

thinking, this different view of things still gets us to the same place as Bishop Tom Wright.

Let's imagine that the ground immediately surrounding, and hosting the tree, is our faith community environment. Let's also imagine that the Fig Tree is a person; possibly but not necessarily a person of faith. Perhaps the tree could be a symbol for the person who is eventually rescued by the good Samaritan. Our image needs to acknowledge that the way in which we tend to the ground, will have a run on effect on the person standing on the particular piece of ground. If we, (the faith community) adequately nurture the ground, then the tree (The person symbolised by the tree) will flourish and produce fruit.

It is easy to see a relationship between the nurtured ground and an abundance of good outcome, for both the person (symbolised by the tree) and the faith community. With any hesitation, this would be something to celebrate.

There is another image presenting itself however, and it crucial to how we should be thinking. The relationship between the tree and the faith community in this metaphor, is one of enfolding and loving. There is not at this point, a card full of rhetorical creedal statements to test the worthiness of any persons to be enfolded.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they are simply enfolded. A little like Cleopas and his

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<sup>3</sup> This statement should not be seen as a denial of 'learning the details of the catechism, but rather it is a nod towards the 'very Anglican' phrase from Richard Hooker, of 'Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Yes creedal statements are important but one needs to also hear Tradition and Reason.

friend, the newly enfolded will discover 'on the way' just what it is they have become a part of.

And again, just as Peter could answer Jesus question about who he (Peter) thought Jesus was, by being inspired to blurt out 'thou art the Christ', then so, if we too tend adequately and faithfully to the nurture of our community, good outcomes will abound.

What is essential for the vibrancy of our parish, and our ability to see the Fig Tree imagery as totally relevant to us, is to recognise that stories about enfolding and nurture lie at the heart of all we do in our ministry among our people here, and in the surrounding community.

In this story today, we should be hearing a clarion call of "all hands to the pump!" We need to engage in appropriate prayer which will spiritually prepare us to get on with job of enfolding and nurturing.

Amen

Sunday March 20<sup>th</sup> 2022