

Stories Jesus told: The Barren Fig Tree

Isaiah 5:1-7 & Luke 13:1-9

Big Idea: Jesus calls us to repent and bear fruit for the kingdom.

Purpose: To encourage people to repentance and fruitfulness.

Let's pray: Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives. Take us and use us to love and serve all people in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The motto of the scouts is...BE PREPARED.

Here's one man who's taken that to the extreme. Meet Peter Stanford. Stanford is a 'prepper'. Someone who's made plans for a catastrophic event or disaster to ensure his survival. Stanford says there are three things preppers must have if things go south. Shelter, food and water.

"I'm not waiting for global conflict to happen yet it could do," he says. "There is a lot of stuff going round at the moment because of Trump and Russia, whether that's misinformation or true is besides the point. I know there are far more instantaneous things that could affect me which would need me to switch on prepper mode."

As a result, Stanford is prepared. He never lets his petrol level get below three quarters full. Just in case he needs to make a quick escape. He also has a bug-out bag. A bag containing essentials that would help him survive for around 72 hours. He's prepared for a nuclear or chemical attack. He owns an army-issued NBC suit (nuclear biological chemical), a gas mask and has plenty of escape routes handy.

He has five locations which he could flee to. Including one which his close family know about so that they could all meet up in the event of a disaster. One of these locations involves his canoe which he's customised over two years. So that he can survive living just on the water if needs be.

Now you may think that's going a little overboard. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be prepared too. Prepared for what? Well since the beginning of chapter 12 in Luke's Gospel Jesus

has been teaching his disciples to be prepared. He's encouraged them to be ready. To recognise the signs of the times. Be prepared! And he continues that thought in our passage today.

And so as we turn to Luke chapter 13 we see that there's some local news that's disturbed some of the Jews. Now there wasn't any News24 back in the day. Or YOU magazine to catch up on the local happenings. No, the news of the day would have been communicated verbally. And so there's a story doing the rounds about an incident with Pilate and some Galileans.

Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea. He's the same man who will preside over the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. He was known by the Jews to be a cruel and greedy man. A fact testified to by this incident. It seems that while some Jews were offering sacrifices at the temple, Pilate had them put to death. Whether or not he literally mixed their blood with the animal sacrifices we're not sure of. But he certainly had them killed. This was clearly an incident that had upset the Jews. And so they come and tell Jesus what's happened.

Well Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach them. Have a look at verse 1: **Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."**

In Jewish thinking, suffering was connected to sin. If tragedy struck it was thought to be the result of God's punishment for some sin you'd committed. We see that in the book of Job. Job's friends see him sitting on an ash-heap, a broken man. They think Job's suffering because he's done something wrong. And so they keep at him to admit his wrongdoing and repent so that God would bless him again.

And it's easy for us to fall into that trap too. When things are going well...God must be happy with me. But when I'm suffering...it must be because I've upset God in some way. I have an illness. Or someone in my family is sick. What have I done to displease God? Well Jesus explains how wrong that kind of thinking is. He asks the crowd if the Galileans were any worse sinners because they suffered like this. And then he tells them: 'no!'

He then uses another example to make the same point. He refers to an incident which was obviously common knowledge at the time. Siloam was the site of a water reservoir for Jerusalem located on the south and east walls of the city. Part of that construction included a tower. But one day disaster struck and the tower collapsed. Killing eighteen people.

And Jesus asks a similar question about this incident. Were those who were killed more guilty than anyone else living in Jerusalem at the time? And once again he tells them: 'no!' Jesus wants to make sure that his audience have a correct theology of suffering. So that when trials come. Which they will. We know how to respond to them.

You see without a theology of suffering, we'll think that something's wrong whenever we face trials. We may find our faith wavering. Or frantically search for the prosperity and blessing that some say should be part of the Christian life.

But Jesus is quick to dismiss any such thoughts. God doesn't operate in a cause-and-effect kind of way. We don't believe in Karma. If you sin today, God isn't going to punish you tomorrow. The fact of the matter is that we live in a broken, sinful world. And sometimes that will be more obvious to us. As we struggle with heartache, or illness or even death. But when you experience suffering in your life don't think that God doesn't love you. Or that he's singled you out because of something that you've done.

But our thoughts naturally seem to want to go there. We want to make sense of our pain and brokenness. And so we assume that we must have done something to offend God. Because if we can just right that wrong. Well then God will stop the pain. Stop the suffering.

And so it's important that we hear Jesus clearly here. That we have a theology of suffering. Because you want to be clear in your own mind before you suffer. Because that's when the wheels can really come off. We saw that in the first parable we looked at. Without a theology of suffering we might be like the seed that landed on the rock. Remember what happened to that seed. It withered up and died. When times of testing come these people fall away.

Now this isn't the main point that Jesus is trying to make here. But it is helpful for us when we think about suffering. And how to deal with suffering from a Christian worldview.

But the main point that Jesus wants to make is that all of us face death. And so we need to be prepared. Did you notice the phrase that he repeats after both of the stories? It's there in verse 3 and verse 5: **But unless you repent, you too will all perish.**

It's been said that nothing is certain except death and taxes. If you owe SARS some money a reminder that this is the week that it's due. But we should be far more concerned about our death than about our taxes. Because Jesus warns us that unless we repent, we too will perish.

Now he doesn't mean that we'll die exactly the same way as those Galileans. Or that a tower will collapse on us. But just as those people died. So too we will die. The truth is that there's nothing that we can do to escape death. We live in a world that constantly reminds us of that fact. We try to put it out of our minds. But we're surrounded by death. Death is an unwelcome intruder in our lives.

This is how some famous people have responded to death. Listen to these quotes:

Woody Allen said: "I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Stephen Hawking said: "I'm not afraid of death, but I'm in no hurry to die."

John Lennon said: "I'm not afraid of death because I don't believe in it. It's just getting out of one car, and into another."

French novelist Jean Giraudoux said: "I'm not afraid of death. It's the stake one puts up in order to play the game of life."

Before I became a Christian I thought quite a bit about death. And unlike these gentlemen. Death terrified me. How can you not be afraid of death? The thought of an endless nothingness on the other side. Or perhaps just disappearing into the ether. Or far more terrifying...the thought of eternal punishment.

You see what's important isn't when we die. Or how we die. But whether or not we repent. To repent is to do an about turn. A 180 degree. It's to acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. And to let his priorities take precedence in your life. Repentance takes the staunch racist and helps them to love their Christian brother or sister from another culture. Repentance takes the self-centred, inward-focused egotist and helps them to serve others. Repentance takes the greedy materialist and makes them generous. Repentance takes the pleasure-seeking hedonist and makes them live for God's glory.

To repent is to stop living life your own way. And start living it God's way. And unless each and every one of us does that then we too face death. Only repentance can change death from a tragic end into a bridge to a new life.

You'll often hear that word 'tragic' to describe someone who dies young. Or in horrible circumstances. But the truth is that death is only tragic for those who haven't repented.

Many of you know the story of Jim Elliot. Elliot was a missionary who was killed while trying to evangelise the Huaorani people of Ecuador. Violently murdered by Indian warriors before his thirtieth birthday. Many would see it as a life wasted. But Elliot would disagree. His journal entry for October 28th, 1949 read: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.' He then follows that with a citation from Luke chapter 13, the parable of the shrewd manager: **when worldly wealth is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.** Elliot knew that the secret to eternal life is to repent and follow Jesus. He was willing to stake his life on it.

And so Jesus says: **Unless you repent, you too will all perish.** If you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Then these words are a challenge to you. Our mortality stares us in the face. A constant reminder of sin in our world. How will you respond? Will you repent? Will you turn and follow Jesus? Because Jesus tells us that unless we do that, then we too will perish.

But most of us here this morning would call ourselves Christians. And so for us the challenge is somewhat different. What should we do once we've repented? Well Jesus expands on that by telling a parable. Listen to what he says from verse 6: **Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'**

'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Now we need to understand this parable in its proper context. In the Old Testament Israel as a nation are referred to as God's vineyard. And also as a fig tree. We saw that in the passage that

we read from Isaiah. And so what Jesus is doing here is rebuking Israel on a *national* level. Sure there may have been a few faithful *individual* Israelites. But the nation as a whole was far from God. They were like a barren fig tree. Without any fruit.

And what Jesus has to say to individuals applies to the nation as a whole. If the Israelites don't repent, they'll perish. And unless Israel as a nation bears fruit, they'll be cut down.

But we can't extrapolate this teaching to our own time. We mustn't think that if South Africa is a barren fig tree we run the risk of being invaded by Namibia. Or Zambia. Israel as a nation were God's people. But God's people today are the church. And so this teaching applies not to modern-day countries. But to the church.

We see this in the book of Revelation. With the message that John receives for each of the seven churches. The church in Ephesus is commended for its doctrinal vigilance and endurance. But then listen to what John writes: **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.**

If the Ephesians don't repent and bear fruit, then they'll lose their lampstand. In other words, they'll be treated in exactly the same manner as unfaithful Israel.

And so we're to take this warning of Jesus seriously. There's no such thing as a barren-fig-tree Christian. A Christian produces fruit. If you're not producing fruit. Then you're like that barren fig tree. In danger of being cut down.

Another thing we learn from this parable is that God is patient. The barren fig tree isn't cut down immediately. The man gives it one more year. He digs around it and fertilizes it. He gives it one more opportunity to bear fruit. And God is like that as well. 2 Peter 3:9 says: **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

Isn't God's patience amazing? When God rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. What's the first thing that they do? They complain! And so what does God do? He doesn't say: 'Why did I bother?' No, he provides food and water for them. Israel and Judah continuously rebel

against God. But for centuries he sends his prophets to call for repentance before he finally acts. God is patient with sinners.

Perhaps you've seen an example of God's patience in your own life. You were once far away from God. Perhaps you didn't want anything to do with him. You lived your life as if he didn't matter. But God was patient with you. And slowly, slowly he drew you to himself. Perhaps through a family member or friend. Or a time of testing. Maybe he put some Scripture verse on your heart.

God didn't write you off when you stumbled. He persevered with you. No matter how often you fell. He picked you up. Dusted you off. And told you to carry on. He bore with you when you didn't listen to him. When you messed up...again. His patience kept you going. And now when you look back on your life you see evidence of God's patience everywhere. Of how he grew you from an infant into maturity. From a baby Christian into a follower of Jesus. A disciple.

But as wonderful as God's patience is. We should never presume on it. Although God is patient. There's also a time when his patience will come to an end. When he will act. If that fig tree is still barren after a year...well the conclusion is obvious. It will be cut down.

So don't put God off. The time to act is now. Jesus has told us that one day he's coming back. And when he does all of us will face judgment. On that day you don't want to be like the barren fig tree. Because on that day you'll no longer be able to rely on God's patience. The time for God being patient will be over. And if we aren't bearing fruit. Well then we'll be judged.

And so finally. What does it look like for us to bear fruit? Although this parable applies specifically to Israel as a nation. It would be right for us to apply it to ourselves as well. If anything, the mandate that God's people bear fruit has actually intensified. And so what does bearing fruit look like?

Well bearing fruit must include repentance. That's the whole point of what Jesus has been talking about. We need to repent. And repentance means living a changed life. God wants us to be transformed into the image of Christ. Which is why when we have God's Spirit living in us we have the fruit of the Spirit. Fruitfulness starts with ourselves. With lives that are changed by God's Spirit at work in us.

And so we bear fruit when we love God. And others. When we're joyful. When we live at peace with one another. When we follow God's example of being patient. When we're kind. Gentle. Faithful. Self-controlled.

The fruitful Christian is one whose life is characterised by good works. Humility. Forgiveness. The fruitful Christian is one who's always ready to share their faith with others. To be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you. To share the gospel of Jesus Christ with a dying world. To make disciples.

Actually personal growth and evangelism are intricately connected. The way that you live your life becomes attractive to others. People should notice something different about you. Maybe it's because you never swear. Or get drunk. You don't tell rude jokes. Or laugh when others tell them. You never snap at your work colleagues. You're kind to everyone. From the tea lady to the CEO. You take families a meal when they have a baby. Or when they're feeling sick.

And when people see you behaving like that. They want to know what's happened in your life to make the difference. And you can tell them. It's Jesus. I want to be a fruitful Christian. I want to be more like my Saviour. Think back to our first parable we looked at. We should all want to be the soil that produces a crop. A hundredfold. Remember how Jesus described the good soil: **But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.**

Produce a crop means the same thing as bearing fruit. We can't live our lives as barren fig trees. The whole purpose of a fig tree is to produce fruit to eat. A Christian who doesn't bear fruit is like a golfer without any clubs. A teacher without their students. A pilot without their plane. A tennis player without their racquet. A jockey without their horse. We simply cannot be a Christian if we don't bear fruit. Bearing fruit is the hallmark of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus says we'll be known by our fruit.

So what does fruit bearing look like? It means spending time with God. Reading your Bible and prayer. It means serving and loving others. On a Sunday that could be helping in the crèche. Welcoming people at the door. Playing in a band. Operating the sound desk. Serving tea and coffee. Helping out in the library. During the week it might mean hosting a LifeGroup. Babysitting for a family. Going for a run with a mate and having a gospel conversation. Leading your family in a time of devotion. Praying for a missionary. Reading a Bible story to your kids at night.

God has given each and every one of us a range of different gifts. And we're to use those gifts to bear fruit. Not just one or two shrivelled up little figs. But a tree bursting with fruit. A tree sagging under the weight of all those juicy, ripe figs. May we be Christians who are fruitful for God's kingdom.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, you've told us plainly. Unless we repent we will perish. There may be some here today who've never done that. Help them now to do that we pray. And then for those of us who have repented. We pray that we would bear fruit in light of that fact. Help us not to be like that barren fig tree that is eventually cut down. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.