

SERMON FOR LENT 3 | 24.03.2019

Isaiah 55: 1-9; I Corinthians 10: 1-13; St Luke 13: 1-9

I can't quite get out of my mind the funeral for Sheryl Lynch that was held here last Monday.

To start with the Church simply wasn't big enough for all the people who wanted to be here – well over 300 guests turned up, booted and suited; then there was the 22 minute eulogy at the start of the Requiem Mass that was brilliantly written by her cousin Sara which caught her to a tee; there too were tens of thousands of pounds worth of flowers that covered half a football pitch when they were all laid out at Enfield Crematorium; but what got to me was the amazing cross section of Islington society that ended up on our doorstep.

Chief of course were her family, her husband Dean and their two children; and then layer upon layer of Sheryls family and friends who had grown up on the Packington estate, those who had gone to the local schools with her and filled all the local pubs and clubs alongside her over the years. This was a real North London funeral – well over the top in every possible way!

And some of the people here were more names than faces – names that you might hear whispered in the streets, or seen recorded in the inside pages of the Islington newspapers. In these walls and spilling out onto the street outside were the gangland mobsters, the godfathers whom we have heard about but probably never encountered, their more lowly runners and junior associates, those who work the county lines with drugs, those who are involved in rackets of all sorts which the likes of you and I have no real insight into.

According to the undertaker who does know, they were all here.

So what does one say in the sermon? Without pointing the finger and making any kind of accusation – or even the odd unwise snide comment – what could one usefully say?

Ken Thompson who was kind enough to come and be a Eucharistic Minister that morning, standing at the back of the Church, said it was fascinating to see how little part most people took in the Mass going on at the front of the Church!

And that is precisely the kind of atmosphere that Jesus met so often when he was out and about teaching and preaching. He knew perfectly well what was going on in the hearts and minds of his 1st century Palestinian audiences. He wasn't stupid and he knew that a directly critical blast from him would have had no effect whatever.

So he used parables like the one we have as our Gospel this morning, which features a fig tree.

Nine years ago – by way of illustration for this story - I brought the fig tree in our garden down to Church in its container. I couldn't do it now: still in its tub it is simply too big - with branches in every direction. Fig trees grow pretty well and if you dig them in they will take over the whole garden. But sadly, like the fig tree in the story, it produces almost nothing! Occasionally you get tiny withered figs, black and solid, but they soon drop off. There simply isn't enough sunshine and the soil isn't that good either.

But, notwithstanding all the apologies I make for it, our fig tree is useless. It is a taker rather than a giver, just absorbing whatever nutrients there are in the soil. For Jesus the fact that it gives nothing back is a form of sin. The tree is, ultimately, useless. Evolutionary science is about creating dynamic organisms that produce something – whether by improving the quality of the air we breathe or producing fruit for others to eat.

In life the assumption remains that anything that wastes resources by taking in and producing nothing needs to be eliminated. And if there are good and bad fruit trees, says Jesus, then equally there are people who put in more than they take out. *Die when I may*, said Abraham Lincoln, *I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow.*

In more earthy terms I remember someone asking in a sermon many years ago: *are you a giver or a taker, the shower head or the drain?* Do we feel the obligation to put into life at least as much as we take out? We come into this world at some real cost to our mothers; we could never have survived without the care of those who loved us; we have inherited models of Christian living, opportunities and freedoms we did not create. Do we not, therefore, have the duty of handing them on?

And that is what I could have I could have preached on Monday.

But I didn't. At least I didn't stop there – any more than Jesus would have done.

Because the parable then switches into the way God does not behave like nature - or indeed like human society. A fig tree usually reaches maturity in about three years and if it is found to be unproductive after that, out it comes.

The owner of the field is all for chopping the unproductive tree down – for all the reasons I have just spelt out. But the savvy horticulturalist in the story is not so sure. How about a second chance? Perhaps we should leave it until next year? And readers of the Gospels will see the pages littered with second, third, fourth chances to have another go: the lives of Matthew the tax collector, Peter the fisherman, Paul the zealot, Zacchaeus, the woman caught in adultery - and all the rest.

How many times should I forgive my brother: seven times?* says Peter to Jesus. *Seventy times seven,* says Jesus; *until you have lost count.

But what about the gangsters, you say, the ones who are doing such damage to our young people, the ones who make the lives of elderly neighbours a nightmare because they are frightened of what will happen when they open their front doors?

Capital punishment would soon sort it out* says the man driving me to the Crem. *Thirty years ago a murder in London would have been all over the papers; now there are so many they barely get an inch on an inside page. Or stick them in prison and throw away the key. At least bring back National Service; that would sort them out.

But it's the quick fix/life is cheap argument. It is so tempting to 'lump them all together'. And it is the argument of resignation. At the end of the day we are saying: those men who stood at the back of the Church are beyond reach. Ever.

Or to the people in Mozambique and Zimbabwe facing the current floods: *sorry, we can't and we won't help.*

Is that really the legacy we want to hand on to the next generation?

Among the funny and the clever placards being carried by the million plus protesters on the march to Whitehall yesterday was one that read, *is this mess the best we can expect?*

It is a very interesting question. Philosophers in the past rooted in the Platonic tradition saw our current lives as pale mirror images of the perfect world that resided somewhere else. So the pain and destruction here was all a temporary illusion, something to be escaped from as quickly as possible.

Surely what those protestors were saying yesterday was more akin to Abraham Lincoln: *where I saw a weed I pulled it up and put a flower in its place.* By our efforts we commit ourselves to making our society a better place for all.

And Jesus would take us one stage further: looking at those untouchable mafia types who filled the Church at Monday's funeral he might well be saying: and *how about giving them another chance? One more year. Find a way...*

Which is, of course, what he is also saying to us when we turn from being the people who give, to the people who only take.