

# Third Sunday in Lent

20.03.2022  
By Janet Foggie

## Introduction

The theme of this Sunday's text is repentance. Although most bibles make a paragraph shift in the middle of the text between verses five and six, it is useful to read the text as a single paragraph, and to think of the common theme of repentance in both halves. As you read, try to connect the story of the fig tree with the other examples given by Jesus. In fact, scholars can't agree what these incidents – the falling tower of Siloam and the Galileans killed by Pilate – were, but we don't need to know everything Jesus' audience knew to get an understanding of the contrast between those who died violently or by accident, and the salvation of the life of an unfruitful tree by a gardener.

What is the relationship between repentance and life for Jesus' audience? Can we imagine them all tied up with gossip about recent violent deaths only to hear Jesus challenge all their assumptions?

In what way does the story of the gardener and the fig tree speak of repentance and life?

---

## Text

Luke 13:1–9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

---

For us, the popular song by Billy Joel, ‘Only the Good Die Young’, might sum up a general social attitude today that the loss of a young life is tragic and mourned deeply. All the best points of a person who dies young are emphasised as we try as a society to come to terms with that fortunately rare occurrence. For the people of Jesus’ time, the death of children and young adults was a very common happening, much more so than for us. A different social view was held. They believed that those who died young, especially in violent or traumatic circumstances, must have done something bad to deserve it. We can read in the book of Job a story about the theology of suffering, and see scriptures challenge this widely held view. However, even though that book was in the scripture Jesus’ contemporaries read and knew, there were still many who believed that an early death was the result of sin.

It is important to think about the word ‘perish’ [in the Greek, \_\_\_\_\_] which is a word that can also mean lost (as in Matthew 10:6 to describe the lost sheep) or destroy (as in Matthew 12:14 when the Pharisees planned to destroy Jesus). Jesus tells his audience that if they believe the Galileans and the people killed by the tower of Siloam were especially wicked because that was their fate, then the audience will be lost in the same way. I understand this to mean that the belief that an early death is caused by wickedness is a belief which prevents true repentance and so causes destruction or loss.

In contrast to this warning that being judgemental and assuming that wickedness on the part of others is the cause of suffering in their lives, so too cutting people off before they have time to repent is just as negative an action. The fig tree represents a person who is yet to find the fruitful blessing of repenting from their sins. That fundamental human action of feeling sorry for the wrongs we have done and intending to put them right is analogous to a tree which does not fruit being weeded and fed manure.

The organic gardener, Charles Dowding, has spent his lifetime pioneering the skills of no-dig gardening. He has proved that better yields are gained not when we dig soil, but rather when we feed it. Jesus similarly provides a model of fruit husbandry that feeds the poorly performing tree. Once fed and cared for, the tree may well fruit the following year, and therefore be saved.

Loss and death are tied together in the Greek verb which Jesus here uses to mean “to perish”. On the opposite side, feeding the soil, tending the ground and life and salvation are balanced. What would be the equivalent of weeding and feeding a human relationship so that repentance and a resultant forgiveness might flourish?

---

## Response

If you have access to a garden, set aside a piece of ground to try no-dig gardening (there’s a reference to one of Charles Dowding’s books below to help you). You will need some cardboard, a good lot of compost and some seeds. Instead of digging over the ground, just put the cardboard down on top of the ground (weeds, grass and all) in a good thick layer, then add a good thick layer of the compost. Into this compost you can plant your seeds directly (late March is the ideal time of year to try this with carrots, peas or beans). Then in summer, you can enjoy the life-giving reward of having the garden that you fed, in turn, feed you.

Is there a relationship in your life which has perished or is lost? What spiritual feeding would be needed to make that relationship grow? What weeds need to be pulled? Can you think of it as a fig tree that has not fruited yet instead of an opportunity lost? Figs hold their fruit for two years, developing in the first year, and ripening in the second. Do you have the patience for a two- or three-year redemptive process in that relationship?

---

## Prayer

Generous God, if we think of fasting, denying and giving things up for Lent,  
remind us instead of your bountiful harvest that feeds the barren,  
finds the lost, and saves those who may perish.  
Turn our hearts around to understand the no-dig forgiveness you preached.  
May we, for our part, not dig and probe at our hurts,  
but instead openly repent and,  
generously forgive others,  
in order to see new fruit form in our relationships.  
In the love of the good gardener who saved the fig tree,

Amen

---

## Further Reading

Charles Dowding, *Organic Gardening: The Natural No-dig Way* (Green Books, 2013).