

# Third Sunday in Lent

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By Pat Bennett

## Introduction

Lent is traditionally a time when we take stock of our lives; as part of this it offers us the opportunity to attend to things which we often fail to notice and to look at things from a different perspective. Today's Gospel passage, with its enigmatic references and its brief parable, is usually seen as a call to repentance and change in our lives, something which can be very pertinent when we are embroiled in conflict. But it is also a passage in which Jesus challenges his listeners to reconsider something they take as a given about how the world works. Exploring this dimension of the text can help us in a different way as we think about how we approach conflict situations.

**Preparation:** Think of a situation – it could be a historical event you are interested in or something in current political or world events which is occupying your attention – and write a very brief (i.e, a few lines) factual account of it. Now take time to read through your synopsis and see if you can identify any assumptions (explicit or implicit) which underpin it. To what extent have these shaped the way you have read or retold the situation?

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## 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.”’

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## Comment

The Gospels are not simple chronological records of Jesus’ actions and words but carefully crafted pieces of writing. Their authors skilfully bring together various basic source units in deliberate conjunctions, employing a wide range of different literary forms to get their message about Jesus and his Kingdom across to their readers.

In today’s short passage we encounter two of these – a pronouncement story (vv.1–5) and a parable (vv.6–9). The two units work together – not just in the way they focus the attention of Jesus’ hearers on a particular issue, but also in the way he brings this to their attention by exposing and challenging some underlying assumptions which are shaping their thinking. While the subject matter of repentance is obviously pertinent to conflict situations, this second aspect can also provide some useful pointers to help our thinking about these.

‘Pronouncement stories’ are common in the Gospels. They take different forms (e.g. correction, enquiry, commendation stories etc.) but are essentially brief narratives which culminate in a pronouncement made in response to the specific stimulus of something which has been said or done. ‘Correction’ stories (of which there are many in Luke) are ones in which the responder takes a position that contrasts with and corrects the position assumed by some other party [1]. This starting position is usually explicitly stated but sometimes, as is the case here, only becomes clear through the response. In correction stories common practice/opinion is usually on the side of the assumed position – which may appear to be harmless or even praiseworthy; however the correction challenges this accepted norm and thus confronts the hearer/reader with a choice by opening up a different set of possibilities to consider.

Jesus has just challenged the crowd about their lack of ability to interpret the times (Lk 12:56). Now it seems that the challenge has been turned back on him, albeit indirectly. Some of those present tell him of a gruesome atrocity involving Pilate and some Galileans and an implicit question hangs heavy on the air – ‘how do *you* interpret this?’ We have no idea what either this incident, or the one Jesus adds to the mix, actually were since there is no mention of them in any contemporaneous sources. However this doesn’t matter since Jesus’ response takes us away from a specific incident into a much more fundamental, foundational issue. Instead of giving an opinion on this particular instance, he instead uses it – in conjunction with an example of a ‘natural’ disaster – to expose the hidden underlying assumption the speakers are carrying. This connected suffering directly

with sin (cf Job 4:7) and hence assumed these particular deaths to be a specific punishment. Using a twice repeated combination of a clear negative coupled with a strong 'but', Jesus overturns this assumption and places everyone in the same position with respect to their sinfulness: just because you haven't suffered, don't assume you aren't in need of repentance.

Luke follows this up with a parable which draws on imagery already strongly connected with the idea of repentance in his Gospel via the words of John the Baptist in 5:9. The parable initially involves a commonplace event with which people would have been familiar and this allows Jesus to once again expose and overturn an underlying assumption. Fig trees were expected to bear fruit within three years and if they did not they would be deemed barren and removed to release space and resources for a more productive tree. Hence any tree surviving the axe after three years would be assumed to be a fruitful one. Unlike many of the other parables we don't get to hear the ultimate outcome here – we only know that the story introduces an unexpected stay of execution which reinforces Jesus' point from a different direction: don't assume that because you haven't been cut down you are living a good and fruitful life.

However, as we have noted before, the parables of Jesus are much more than a simplistic didactic manoeuvre for making a single moral point. They were, and remain, an invitational and interactive way of stimulating engagement and drawing out questions which can then lead on to critical reflection on our ways of being and doing. Multiple aspects here – the focus on a single fig tree rather than the wider vineyard, the implications of the timetable, the fact that the tree is not simply left to its own devices, the suggested interventions etc. can all provide further starting points for thought about how we might approach uncovering and changing assumptions which are inhibiting understanding or progress in a situation of conflict.

[1]For further reading see Robert C. Tannehill 'The Pronouncement Story and its Types' in *The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007) pp 19–34

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## Response

Both the correction story and the parable turn on bringing to light the way in which underlying assumptions not only affect our reading of events and our reaction to them, but can do so in ways which impede the development of better understanding or fuller flourishing. The same dynamic can often be at work in a conflict situation: how we understand it can be shaped by assumptions (which may be unrecognised, or recognised but unacknowledged) in ways which can prevent progress towards better understanding and possible resolution; these assumptions can sometimes also actively amplify and exacerbate difficulties and thus intensify aspects of the conflict.

- How can we become more aware of the assumptions – our own and those of others – which we are bringing to conflict situations in which we are involved?
- Are we prepared to allow our assumptions to be brought into the light and challenged?
- Are there ways in which we can encourage or help others to examine underlying assumptions which they might be bringing to the situation?

The closing part of the parable suggests that recognition of such a situation is only the first step – additional effort and input are required if things are to have a chance of changing for the better. Here it can sometimes be helpful to think of

conflict systems in terms of the energy involved in them and where it is being directed, trapped, wasted or consumed – for example in reinforcing stories, identities, prejudices, or patterns of behaviour. This in turn can help us see ways in which energy might be redirected, released or transformed into a more creative form. Since such changes are unlikely to be instantaneous we may also sometimes need to weigh up whether it is worth continuing the effort rather than giving up on it: to totally cut down the tree and replace it, while easier in many ways, would have meant a three year gap before there was a chance of any olives; the digging and manuring proposed by the gardener, though involving more sustained effort, brings the possibility that olives might be seen much sooner.

- Do we have particular narratives, behaviours or language connected with a conflict situation which we find difficult to let go of, even if we recognise that they might be unhelpful?
- What can we do about these and who might be able to help us with that?
- Are there things we might be able to do to support others in changing modes of thought and behaviour?

Finally it is worth remembering that it is rarely our sole responsibility to change whole conflict systems – especially when these are complex or occurring on a very large scale or stage. In such situations it is easy to feel overwhelmed/paralysed by, or guilty about, all that we cannot alter. What we can do though is to attend carefully to our own behaviour and speech as these impinge on the situation, and to those things (no matter how small they may seem) which we can perhaps influence towards helpful changes – and then direct our intentions and energies towards these.

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## Prayer

Jesus,  
grant us a listening ear  
and a seeing eye  
that we may grow in awareness  
and insight;

grant us a courageous heart  
and committed hands  
that we may accept and work  
towards change;

So may our lives  
bear the fruit of your Kingdom  
Amen.

