

Luke 13:1-9

I don't know if you've ever been waiting in a long queue, perhaps at an airport or in a bank, and someone has pushed in – it's a rather interesting phenomenon to behold – if there's an American in the queue they'll tell the person to get to the back in no uncertain terms – whereas, the English? – Well, we might roll our eyes, perhaps we'll tut

If we are feeling particularly angry, maybe we'll use the line – “excuse me, there is a line you know” – it's only in extreme circumstances that we'll use the most *offensive* phrase in the English language – “I don't mean to be rude but...”

As a nation we are famous for our queuing – we don't mind waiting for something as long as it's in an ordered way –

But it has to be ordered in the RIGHT way – we'll always notice if the queue next to us is moving faster than the one we're in – or if someone is taking longer than they should when they're at the front

There's something reassuring about waiting for something – it's almost like, if there's a queue for something – a film, a play –

We know we've made the right decision, if all these other people want to see it too – we know it must be worth waiting – there's something rather disconcerting arriving at the cinema and finding you're the only people to buy tickets for that viewing – or the only people in a restaurant that night, and your food comes out only a minute or two after you ordered it – there is something good about waiting

The parable that Jesus tells in our passage from Luke's Gospel today is about waiting – it's not one of our Lord's most famous parables – possibly because it's so short, or perhaps because it's often given the catchy title of 'the parable of the manure'

Jesus is telling a series of parables as he walks with his disciples through Samaria to Jerusalem –

We've had the Good Samaritan, the rich fool and others earlier on in the Gospel – and we're about to come to the mustard seed – and so this really short parable comes in the middle

A man owns a fig tree in his vineyard and for three years it hasn't produced any fruit – so he asks his gardener to cut it down –

'It's wasting soil' he says – something else could be planted there – 'hang on a minute', says the gardener – 'let's give it one more year – I'll give it some manure and look after it a bit better – and we'll see how it does next year'

It's really a parable about patience – a parable against taking drastic action too soon – a parable about waiting

We too are in a time of waiting – Lent is a time of waiting and preparation for the joys of Easter – I wonder whether you're also waiting to have again what you might have given up for Lent, if you've done so – whether you're waiting for that first taste of chocolate in your mouth on Easter day – that first glass of wine –

I'm proud to say I haven't had a drink since Shrove Tuesday – when I drunk all the gin in my house in preparation for Lent, with the help of my wife, I have to say – by which time I'd had far too much to even consider making pancakes

I too am waiting, I'm waiting for that sparkle and fizz as the tonic hits the glass and the lemon bobs up to the surface

But, a bit like the queue for something that's worthwhile, there's something about the *waiting* that makes the *receiving* that much sweeter – without the striving of Lent, the joy of Easter would be less joyous – absence makes the heart grow stronger, as they say

And we do tend to be pretty good at waiting for things in our lives – or at least some things

But I wonder how are we at waiting for things in the church?

Perhaps we don't fare quite as well

Amma Syncletica is one of the desert mothers – in the 4th Century she went off into the desert in Egypt, leaving behind her wealthy family and chose to live as a hermit in a cave – she said a lot about the importance of patience and stability –

when a restless monk who wanted to move on to bigger things came to her and asked her what to do, she said this – ‘do not go to another place, it will do you a great deal of harm – if a bird abandons the egg she has been sitting on, she prevents them from hatching – and in the same way a monk or nun will grow cold and their faith will perish if they go around from one place to another’

For our faith to grow there needs to be stability – there needs to be rhythm – There needs to be the repetition and ritual of the Christian life – for some that might mean praying at the same time every day – having a favourite prayer that is said – or simply coming to church every week

Without that repetition and stability, our faith will grow cold –

I hear often about people who go around to different churches – They attend somewhere for a while, then feel it’s not doing it for them and so move onto somewhere else – they feel that this or that part of the church is not *quite* what they’re looking for, so they’re off to the next church

And so, unlike that fig tree that sits in the soil, they’re being *pulled out* of the soil before they’ve had a chance to sit in it for a little while - to draw up some of the nutrients in their surroundings and eventually perhaps to grow fruit – instead, Jesus says, the fig tree *needs* to be left to sit – we need to have patience

A wise old priest once told me a story about when he was a young monk – he was in the chapel trying to pray – but he found the pew too uncomfortable, and it was too cold in the chapel – he couldn’t settle – he kept shuffling and muttering to himself – he couldn’t settle to even *begin* praying

The superior of the monastery noticed this, and came to him and asked him if there was a problem - “I can’t pray”, the young monk said – “it’s too cold, the pews are uncomfortable, I’m not in the mood – I try to pray but the words just won’t come” – the superior looked at him and said – “my brother, be patient – just sit and love him”

It is patience and stability that is required to grow in the Christian life – it is to just sit and love Jesus

And where do we get that stability from? – we get it from joining with the forms of worship and rituals that have been performed by the church for hundreds or even thousands of years

We don't say the words we do in church on a whim – we don't wear these vestments because we like dressing up – We don't follow the same actions and rituals as our forefathers and mothers in the faith because we don't like change – but because these offer the stability of our faith – these things are the manure, so to speak, that we put around our fig tree –

The time tested ways of doing things that have provided sustenance for Christians for so long – and will continue to do so

We pray the Lord's Prayer as Christians did in the 1st Century – we, as priests, wear broadly the same vestments as were worn by those in the 4th century – our services take the same structure and shape as those of the 3rd century –

And this is not tradition for tradition's sake – but an acknowledgement that these things have shaped and driven our faith, and so many of those who went before us

There's a joke about a churchwarden who meets his Bishop and tells him that he's been churchwarden for 40 years – “you must've encountered a lot of changes in that time”,

Says the Bishop – “yes, and I've resisted all of them”, says the churchwarden

There can be a truth in that – sometimes change *is* needed – and sometimes the church needs to embrace that – But in the Christian tradition, and Jesus' parable this morning, there is more of a focus rather on stability

On the wisdom of the past – on being bedded in rich soil in order to produce fruit

So, this Lent – as we wait patiently for Easter Day – as we grow in patience – I pray that we might be like that fig tree – That we might sit in the rich soil of our churches – and of our church tradition –

That we might cease to be restless, but that we might just be willing to sit and love him - that we might have stability in our faith – and that it might therefore bear fruit

Amen