

Learning Lessons

Matthew 24:30-35

The common fig tree has been cultivated from ancient times and grows wild in sunny locations where there is plenty of good soil. Though they can tolerate drought, their deep and aggressive root system seeks out water wherever they can. When established, not only do they provide fruit for people and animals to eat, they also provides shelter from harsh sunlight. Just what we're needing on the weekend the clocks go back and winter and British Summer Time, such as it was, comes to an end. In the Bible, there is a quote from the prophet Micah, "...each man under his own vine and fig tree", denoting a world of peace and prosperity.

Jesus would have been familiar with the fig trees, and as He sat teaching, He reflected on the lessons they provided. What lessons? The fact that there is a certainty around the rolling onwards of the seasons. Unlike most of the evergreen trees in Israel-Palestine, fig trees are deciduous. They bud; they blossom; they put on their leaves; they bear fruit; the leaves fall; the tree becomes dormant; only to begin again as the seasons move round once again. But the trees tell us something. We learn from them. We learn that, in many cases, the planting of trees like this takes thought and time. That someone decided that this was the place, and this was the tree, and this was the fruit that would be eaten. To plant a tree is a vote for the future. What a lesson to learn in Jesus' time, when the future looked uncertain; and in the time of the gospel writer Matthew, when Christian communities were already being persecuted for their faith.

And perhaps for us, today, a lesson for our time. What a lesson to learn when the current is caught between the rock of a Covid semi-lockdown and the need to care for the health of our nation, and the hard-place of the economic realities that are crushing businesses great and small across the country. Do we batten down the hatches, or do we, impossibly hard though it is, plan for a better future because we know a better future is going to come? Do we choose to live fearfully, or faithfully? Do we surrender to hopelessness, or hopefulness? The American novelist Louisa M Alcott, who wrote *Little Women*, wrote, "I am not afraid of storms for I am learning to sail my ship."

We, in this Church, through the courage and sacrifice of many people, have been enabled to do many things despite the lock-down. Even re-opening the building took effort and work. Wrestling with new technology to reach out to those who cannot yet come. Trying to work out what, despite everything, we can still do. Beginning to think about budgets for next year, where we have to be realistic, but also hopeful. Some are tired, many are anxious, and I know that I find myself swinging between bright-eyed optimism and blank-eyed despair, but we will get through this. From lessons we have learned in the past, from things that we have experienced ourselves, or from things others have told us about that speak clearly now. We will win through. Every detail may not be worked out; every pathway may not be clear; every 't' might not be crossed; every 'i' might not be dotted; but we will win through. The scientist Alan Turing said, "We can only see a short distance ahead, but we can see plenty there that needs to be done." There's truth there.

At this time, maybe at any time in life, what Jesus is saying to us about the lessons we learn is this. There are things in the world that are known and that can be anticipated. Look at the fig tree. When its shoots appear, you know that summer is near. There is pattern and order and regularity in the world, the very basis of science and technology, and it means that we have a measure of control, without which life would not be viable.

There are also unknowns. Life is sometimes ordered and reliable, but we know that it can also be precarious and unpredictable. However much we feel in control, we are always vulnerable. We know that we are always susceptible to the unexpected and the unplanned that suddenly throws our routine lives into turmoil and confusion. This is the hour of crisis, when the abyss opens beneath us, it comes in many guises, some more dramatic, some less dramatic. It may be the loss of a loved one. It may be an experience of failure or rejection. It may be a cancer diagnosis, a loss of a job, or a betrayal by someone we trusted. It may be Covid 19. Our familiar world is ruptured, and we are thrown into disarray. It is then that our lives are judged, our resilience is tried, our foundations come under scrutiny. It is then that our faith is tested. We don't know when they will happen, but we know they are part of life.¹

What then do we do? How then do we cope with this theory, because we know it's not somewhere out there, it is actually somewhere down here, with us and amongst us. I wonder if part of our response is drawing on those life and faith lessons from our past. When life was stable and ordered, there are the lessons that stand us in good stead when times are tough. What are the basics of what we believe? How should we behave towards others. What kind of world do we want to live in? What kind of community are we prepared to commit to now and in the future? From the fig tree learn its lessons, what goes around comes around. It may be feel like the winter of our days now, but spring will come. It may feel like darkness has shrouded the world in night, but dawn will break. It may feel that the harshness of life is unbearable, but there are, still, good people out there, doing good things so that we might find help and hope. Sometimes that might be us, sometimes that might be others, but it still goes on.

For me, at least, when I am tempted to despair, I find reminders of hope and kindness and persistence and generosity popping up where I least expect. Whether I like it or not, or expect it or not, that care is there. And if that is true for me, it is also true for you. It doesn't eradicate entirely the hurt or the need, but it helps, just enough, to get us through to the next day.

A few weeks ago, in the last of our Autumn events where we had guest speakers talking about emerging from lockdown, our neighbour Jim Naughtie said:

"We need to talk about the things that have to be done. What kind of society do we want? How we bridge those gaps. It's not just about the outcome. It's about the process of doing it. If we have a community and society that broadly determines that it is important to do this, then we have caused a huge barrier. We do need a feeling of a national effort. We are still short of that.

We still wait to hear a kind of voice that rises above the throng. Now is the moment that we should hear voices, young voices, about where we might go. There would be an enormous appetite for that kind of sense of forward-looking purpose."

What are the lessons that we need to learn about the shape the post-Covid world? What will matter in terms of social responsibility; what will hold our communities together? What must the

Church and faith communities say, and not just say, demonstrate by how we set our priorities for the world we want, the world we need?

Dreams have to be renewed or else they die. From the fig tree learn its lessons...The world still turns on its axis, and acts of kindness and generosity and love still need to be practised.

It's not just about being nice to each other. We've got to think what kind of society and church we are going to be. What do we want to survive this time? What will we plant now in hope? From the fig tree learn its lesson...

I've learned this: make this time count. Out of this time we bend our minds and our emotions to the future. Obligation to think about the future and to make it better. If we do that, we may look on these times as not an imprisonment but a liberation. In our world, in this community, we need to be planting fig trees, for shelter, for nourishment, for compassion, for hope.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Lance Stone, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 2, pps 245-247