

Are we bearing fruit? And if we are, what does that look like.

How do we know when a project, or a plant or an activity has given all that it can and it is time to move on?

These are complex and difficult questions to answer, whether we take them literally or figuratively – because in many ways they reflect individual or community values and constructs.

Over the past few weeks I have been involved in a number of conversations that edge around these question, though in our very careful English way, has not been quite a pointed.

One of the conversations I have had several times is about the Electoral Roll forms we have been completing. Why are we counting people? Who are we counting? If we are shrinking are we honest about it? Do numbers on an electoral roll reflect the good we are doing, or the relationships we have within the community? Should we only include people who come to church every week?

There are clear guidelines about who the church counts, and why – we may each have an opinion on whether such numbers reflect the fruit we are bearing. How do we measure what we are doing as a church and as Christian community – surely it is not only about numbers, surely it is about the people we support, the conversations we have, the care we offer, the engagement we have with our neighbours and the wider community.

One of the other conversations I have been having is with Fr Laurence and Rev John. As Laurence approaches his retirement next week, and as we prepare for the closure of LIFC in its current form later in the year – is the end coming because we are no longer bearing fruit? I am sure that all who have approached retirement in some way wrestle with similar questions – what fruit have I grown, what legacy do I leave?

Of course, there are many answers to all these questions, but as we will affirm several times in the coming week as we farewell Laurence – he has left his mark; much has been achieved by LIFC and by Laurence. He is an amazing historian and teacher, he is a good listener and has journeyed with many. The work of LIFC has not only influenced this community, but more widely across Brent and London, and its success in raising issues is such that the Diocese has created a more senior position to cover this work. But without drawing too long an analogy it is also time to loosen the soil and see what new fruit might grow.

While these conversations have been happening, around us locally and globally other issues have been slowly growing. Over shadowing our conversations have been the ongoing unsettling debates about BREXIT and the future of Britain and its relationship with the EU; and then the horrific events first in Aotearoa New Zealand, then in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. The pain which people are feeling, as

they are surrounded by events which seem out of our control, have led to much talk this week of helplessness, and why?

In light of all these pastoral conversations, I have found the images in our short Gospel reading today quite confronting, and yet profoundly in this short narrative Jesus is addressing similar pain and uncertainty in his own community.

The first part of the text Jesus is responding to questions about specific events which have taken place within their community. It is why it doesn't make a lot of sense to us, but to those whom Jesus is talking it was news of the day. Members of the crowd report news of Galileans being murdered, and Jesus adds to this story by talking about 18 others who were killed when a tower fell on them. The question they ask it 'who's fault is it' - why did God let this happen? Jesus responds to their pain, and to their questions on these two calamities, and tries to explain about the nature of God. Jesus does not use this as an opportunity to defend God against charges of mismanaging the universe. Instead, Jesus implies that we must not equate tragedy with divine punishment. Sin does not make atrocities come. They just come¹.

This does not mean we should just ignore disasters, or even dismiss tragedy –Jesus explains – but rather tragedy does not equate to God's anger or retribution. Disasters happen – humans will damage themselves and their environment and this will have consequences. And sometimes bad things just happen!

On the other hand this does not mean we can live however we like – that there are no consequences for wrong choices or sinful behaviour. Sin, those acts which separate us further and further from God do hurt us, and all our relationships. Jesus wants those who are listening to him to understand that they have the power to change.

Jesus does care that these disasters happened and so he tries to explain through a parable - the parable of the fig tree that bears no fruit and a landlord who wants to destroy it. As a good steward of his land and crops, the land owner concludes that there are two problems at hand: (1) the tree is worthless, because it is barren for a third year in a row, and (2) it is taking up space that could otherwise be productive in the vineyard. It is time to cut it down.

The caretaker pleads for patience. Give it another year, he says. In the meantime he will loosen the soil around it and add fertilizer. It might still produce fruit in another year, and that would be good. There would be no need to replace the tree with another. And think of it: if the tree is replaced by another, the new tree would need several years to produce fruit. There is good reason to give this tree another chance. On the other hand, if it does not produce fruit in another year, then it can be cut down.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2789

The parable is just that, it's a story trying to help a community understand the pain it is experiencing. One thing Jesus is trying to help them see is that God did not create tragedy as a punishment, but also that God is patient with the fact that they do sin. On one level the existence of sin is not the issue – God knows we do the wrong thing. Rather the willingness to change and grow is at the heart of this message.²

The parable helps place God's judgment and grace into a larger perspective. In the larger scheme of things, God's grace is greater than God's judgment. How could it be otherwise? Divine patience is simply another expression of God's love and grace. But God's grace is not to be understood as casual indulgence or indifference. We cannot continue to ignore fruitlessness, or tinker around the edges of those issues, or for want of another word –sin- that disrupts our lives and relationships – particularly our relationship with God.

We are facing many difficult questions and issues . There is a great deal of pain and confusion – as there was in the community that Jesus addressed two millennia ago – but what God tried to assure that community was that in the end, despite the questions and pain, grace is stronger. And that when we are concerned about our value, we need to nurture our roots, nourish our soil, and look for the coming of new fruit.

This week is likely to be difficult one for many. The death toll in Mozambique will continue to rise; we face further votes in parliament about BREXIT, and on Wednesday we will farewell Fr Laurence from LIFC and celebrate his ministry in this place. We will also enter our 4th week of Lent, a week which often is hard to sustain as 20 days already seems to have been a long journey!

But our readings today remind us to continue on our journey, to continue to nurture the soil around us, to offer to God in prayer the pain of those things we cannot control, and to yearn for more of God's grace as we grow in faith– even in the midst of times which might overwhelm us. And if we feel that it is going to overwhelm us, then maybe we can take comfort and contemplate the words we heard earlier in Isaiah puts:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ...
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts³. Amen

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1578

³ Isaiah 55: 6,8,9.