

Year C 3rd Sunday in Lent March 20 2022 DJK MVLC ~ God is the Gardener.

When I grew up smoking was a great sin – I have never had a smoke in my life.

But from a young age I was given a sip or port or wine – to me alcohol was no big deal – certainly not a sin.

In the Barossa it's a sin to smoke and a sin not to drink. For many pious Christians it's a sin to drink but it's ok to smoke. Which is the greater sin?

There are sins which some people find offensive and severe and there are sins which are 'whatever'.

- Doing 105 on a country road is a sin – whatever?
- Making homebrew – not paying tax is a sin – whatever?

Jesus says today "Repent or Die". He wants us to completely change our way of life – to turn away from any sin and focus on him.

He's calling us to "convert". Convert is the French word for repentance – a regular car going along the road and with a press of a button the roof rolls back and the car changes into a convertible. He's calling us to convert – to change - to listen to the gentle voice that is always there saying, "this is the way go this way".

At the time Jesus was teaching there were some terrible tragedies in Jerusalem. The worst was when Pilate murdered some Galileans in the Temple of God and used their blood to make some kind of mock offering. The people asked Jesus – were these Galileans worse sinners than all the other Galileans?

A logical kind of question. Jesus answers, "**no that is not true, but unless you repent, you will all die like them**". I don't think this was the answer they were looking for.

Then they mentioned how the Tower of Siloam fell down and killed 18 people – it seemed so unfair – Siloam is a place where many people went to be healed.

They asked, why did these 18 people die in a freak accident like that – were they worse sinners than the other people there? Again, Jesus gives them the answer they probably didn't want: "**no that is not true, but unless you repent, you will all die like them**".

It's always a temptation to blame God for any unexplainable deaths. Jesus very clearly tells us it's wrong to assume that the victims are somehow worse sinners than anyone else and therefore deserve to die.

Jesus answer is focus on your own sin – repent – “turn or burn” as they say.

The fact is no matter where we are from, Coonalpyn to Caloote; whether you're rich or poor, young or old; whether you think you're a sinner or a saint; you are under God's judgment unless you repent and have faith in Jesus.

Jesus told them a parable – parables are a way of teaching to push home a truth.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for some fruit and found none.

So he said to the gardener, “Listen! I come here looking for fruit on this fig tree year after year, and there's none. Chop it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?”

The Gardener replied, “Please, leave it for one more year, I'll dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Who is who in this parable?

To me the parable makes it sound like Jesus is talking about God.

It says “a man” had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. Most people think that the “man” is God, because Israel is known as God's vineyard – that is a common thought – beware of common thoughts.

But it was just as common for any farmer to have fig trees growing in their vineyard. Even to this day traditional Israeli farmers use fig trees as a trellis for their grapes.

Micah says: *I want to sit under my own vine and fig tree.* Grapes in the warmer months, figs in the cooler months, the Figtree a trellis for the grapevines.

Now this is not Schild Estate or anything – but we can understand in this context any farmer would have a fig tree and a grape vine. So let me put it to you that “the man” Jesus was just talking about, is an ordinary farmer, with an ordinary Figtree, in an ordinary vineyard.

And we know Farmers don't we? Put up your hand if you know a farmer?

Let's be honest, if a farmer has a fig tree, or an apple tree, or a peach tree, or a plumb tree that doesn't produce any fruit, year after year, he or she will chop it down. You don't waste water, you don't waste fertilizer, you don't waste time.

So what happens, the gardener, says to the farmer; "Hang on, let me water it, let me dig around the roots, let me put manure on it. Let me give it another year, and we'll see how it goes.

Most people think "God is the farmer, who wants to punish the wicked fruitless tree, the people; and Jesus is the kind gardener, who intercedes for us sinners."

They can think that way all they like – but we are deeper thinkers – we put things to the test. We know Jesus is God, we know the Father and Jesus are one - *if you have seen me you have seen the Father.*

How can God be the farmer and Jesus be the gardener and have such opposing views – one says chop it down the other says let me love it and nurture it – that can't be. God and Jesus have the same will – to love and restore.

It helps tremendously if we imagine God is the Gardener in this parable – the nurturer, the loving one.

So who is it who wants to chop down the tree?

Who is it that says, "You're not good enough; you haven't done well enough; you're not like us, you haven't produced anything!

Who is it that says; "we're ripping you out, we're putting you in jail; we're cutting off your benefits; we're suspending you; we're silencing you?

It's not God, It's not Jesus, it's us - it's humanity.

God is the gardener: "Don't chop it, let me look after this person, let me nurture this person, let me love this person, let me die instead of this person."

If you've been thinking through all this, we realise that God gives us so, much more than a single year - three score years and ten for most. All the time, the gardener is focusing on us – loving us.

When God is the gardener what Paul says – is so much deeper: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." God, the gardener, does not give up on us. (Rom 8)

You might question “God the gardener” when you remember the point of this whole parable is to – repent or die. And God is no gardener if you believe repentance is something you have to do – because if you have to do repentance – God is the grim reaper.

We do not do repentance - repentance is a gift of faith.

God the gardener is repenting the tree – next year’s fruit is the fruit of repentance.

It’s a grace centred theology, or let’s say a Lutheran theology, that claims so boldly, Repentance is a gift or work of God.

Mostly you hear it that repentance is something you have to do yourself – a good work – unfortunately, that way you expose your-self to God the farmer who will rip you out if you don’t produce good fruit.

Repentance is a gift – it is what the gardener does to you.

In Acts we read, “When the new Christians heard Peter, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has given repentance to the Gentiles that they too may have life”. (Acts 11:18)

In Timothy we read, “unbelievers, must be gently nurtured, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth”. (2 Timothy 2:25)

If that’s not a gift, if that is not God the Gardener – well “I’ll go he”.

“Repent or die” is not a threat – it’s an enabling command of Jesus – every command has a blessing or it’s an abuse.

My prayer is that these readings of Lent, shape, prune, water, enrich you into repentance – to change your life toward a new direction – of course you have to do something – but it’s the Gardener giving you every strength and every motivation toward a life changing way with Jesus.

Lord bless us with the gift of repentance, that we overcome the thought that we have to change our sinful ways by ourselves. Thank you for the blessing of the Holy Spirit in our everchanging, ever repenting, lives. Amen.