

Hymns: **368** **“When morning gilds the skies”**
 154 **“Come, divine interpreter”**
 248 **“I heard the voice of Jesus say”**
 404 **“Go, tell everyone”**

Readings: **Galatian 5:16-25**
 Luke 13:1-9

THE FIG TREE AND THE GOOD FRUIT

- 1 Our first reading today tells us about the ‘Fruits of the Spirit’ (verse 25), but also what we might call the ‘dark things’ in verse 19. A clear contrast! Luke tells us a story about a fig tree which hasn’t had any fruit for three years and is about to be cut down: “Cut it down, it’s wasting the soil”. We can also read about a fig tree in Matthew 21, but there it comes off much worse, it is condemned and withers up immediately. Then, in Mark 11 it doesn’t do any better, it is cursed and later is found to be withered up! So we are better off with the story in Luke’s version.

I know a preacher who can’t understand any of this. Why should Jesus be so hard on the poor old fig tree? Well, it seems that there is a moral in all of this. At the beginning of the passage in Luke, we hear about Galileans who suffered and of the need to repent and of the tower of Siloam, where people also suffered and there is the warning, by Jesus, that “so will you (suffer) unless you repent”.

There is a contrast here, just as there is between the ‘dark things’ and the much more hopeful note in Galatians 5.

So let’s continue with this.

It’s now the end of February. How are you getting on with your New Year resolutions? Did you make any? Even if we didn’t (and I didn’t), we should ask if there are any signs of spiritual growth in us, any improvement? The early Methodists met in what they called ‘Bands’, to discuss just these questions – ‘have you grown in grace?’...’are you striving for Christian perfection?’ (John Wesley was very keen on this), and such-like. Very challenging! Do we do that nowadays? We belong to a Study Group and recently we looked at various works of art – that was fine – but then we were asked searching questions about our attitudes to the picture. For instance, we looked at Holman Hunt’s picture of Christ ‘The Light of the World’ (in St Paul’s Cathedral), where Jesus, holding a light, is knocking at a door with no handle on it. Then we were asked to think about those areas of our lives in which we have refused to open the door of our lives to Jesus, to refuse to allow his light to shine in us and through us...and so on. (We found that this study course was a Methodist one!).

The passage from Galatians has the 'Fruits of the Spirit' – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness. Gentleness and self-control. It's perhaps easy to remember the first two then think if (like me) you have problems with and of the others, like 'patience', for instance, especially when I'm caught up in a traffic jam or when I get interrupted by 'scam' messages on my computer! But these are 'The Good Fruits'.

The fig tree was under threat because it didn't bear fruit.

So that's the question: how many of the Fruits of the Spirit are seen in us? We may say "That's too much to expect, we're only human after all". Remember the 'dark things' in that same passage. We humans are capable of being caught up in them. It happens all the time – read the papers, watch the news on T.V. or listen to the radio! And it's not only those 'dark things', it's also what we might call the 'grey areas': selfishness, being caught up in the desire for material things – "stuff" – being allured by consumerism, and so on. The 'Good Fruits' demand that we go beyond these things. What hope have we?

- 2 There is Canon at Peterborough Cathedral who is responsible for finance. His responsibilities include many building in the Cathedral precincts, of which one is the garden of the Bishop's Palace (they prefer to call it his house or lodgings these days). In the garden were some raspberry bushes (or canes) which didn't bear much fruit. The Head Gardiner said he would pull them up, but the Canon, who knew his Scriptures, said, "No, give them a good dose of fertilizer and give them another year". We don't know what happened to the fig tree in Luke's Gospel, but in Peterborough, the raspberry crop was fruit fit for a Bishop!

It's the Gospel of the Second Chance! We often hear it from this pulpit! Even if we are caught up in the 'dark things', there is always another chance. During Lent, we are reminded that Jesus, in dying that terrible death, and by his resurrection, conquered the power of darkness, of all the 'dark things' that threaten us. He sets us free, we are given another chance.

- 3 Let us take this a bit further. We know we can all fall down. We are told that we can begin all over again. Good!

But that isn't all!

Think of that hymn we sang, which I choose especially: 'Angel voices, ever singing'..... In the third verse it says: 'Thou didst ears and hands and voices for thy praise DESIGN! 'DESIGN'! We were made for that! We were all made for that! None excluded. Not just a favoured few, not just the 'religious'. However and whenever human beings originated - they say we all began with a tribe of people in Southern Africa who lived by killing animals, then learned to grow crops and then they got curious and started exploring. They went North (it was the only way they could go – or swim!), through Central Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, to the old sire of Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham lived, then on into India and China. Then west to Europe and

eventually here – remembering that in those days Britain was joined to the Continent, there was no sea, that came later. (Britain a part of Europe, remember that on 23 June!). When and how it happened we don't know for certain, but our Christian belief is that we were created and shaped and formed by a loving, all-powerful God. We were made, created and designed, to be the bearer of 'The Good Fruit'; that was how and why we were made! You and I and potentially all of the human race.

I expect you have heard of Malala. Someone gave me a piece about her the other day. Malala was with her school class in Pakistan when they were attacked by the Taliban. She was badly injured in her neck, ear, face and brain. After treatment in several hospitals, she eventually came to Birmingham and received treatment – and still lives there. She has been to the U.N., received the Nobel Peace Prize and still speaks out against violence, wanting to help other people.

We think about how we were made, designed, created.....we might like to hear what Malala says: "We human beings don't know how great God is. He has given us an extraordinary brain and a sensitive, loving heart. He has blessed us with two lips to talk and express our feelings, two eyes which see a world of colour and beauty, two feet which walk on the road of life, two hands to work for us, a nose which smells the beauty of fragrance and two ears to hear the words of love." As a result of this, she said "somehow by the grace of God, I was able to speak to millions of people". He aim is "to make the world a more peaceful place" and she expresses a great love for God. And she is a Moslem! They don't always get a good press, but she is an example of a human being used as a consequence of doing what we were all designed to do – and to be.

The hymn goes on, dare I say, to 'the maker's art'. Look at the colour and splendour of this church – the light shining through those windows, the carving on the memorials, and that Icon of John Wesley prayerfully painted in the Orthodox way...all here, enriching our worship. We were created to create. But the verse goes on....'music's measure'! The violins and cello and piano were heard as a prelude to our worship (you have to be here early to hear this), and the singing! Visitors are impressed, as we were just over two years ago when we first came here, by the sound of voices. Then those African singers, with their unique harmonies (how did they get them?) . Then.....I was going to mention the organ, but unfortunately it is playing tricks at the moment and can't be played. But we have the piano and one of God's gifts to this church is Elvis who plays so well.

'Methodism was born in song', it is said. But why? Because they were full of the Gifts of the Spirit, they had learned to produce The Good Fruit. It is said that offering worship and praise and thanksgiving to God our Creator is the finest thing we humans can ever do.

It's what we were made to do, designed to do! Don't underestimate our worship. We have to show our faith, to exhibit those Fruits in our lives, in practical ways, yes, of course.

But if we are told, rather cynically, that worship is not important, that we are not living in the real world, that we are religious 'nuts', remember that, generally speaking, cynics don't sing much! The Fruits of the Spirit, freely offered, gratefully received, effectively displayed, are our fulfilment. But they are also our 'secret weapon', to be gloriously used, especially in those 'dark places' which infect our world.

They talk about 'Fresh Expressions' and no doubt we have to listen. But our task is to be light in dark places, to offer compassion in our service and, through the Fruits of the Spirit to bring light and hope and healing grace to the world around us, even to that new world typified by the 'Silicon Roundabout' just up the road.

Let us pray for 'The Good Fruit' in our lives, so that we may play our part, as Jesus asked us to do, in building the Kingdom of God here and now (remember the Lord's Prayer... 'thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven').

May God bless us all with more of the Fruits of the Spirit, 'The Good Fruits'!