

## **Luke 13:1-9 and the Fifth Anniversary of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Good morning dear plums, and apples and bananas. Does it seem odd that I should call you this? Yes probably. But today we are reminded that we are all fruit for Christ, and it is a joy to gather together to worship God in our church, which we might think of as our spiritual fruit bowl. Today, we gather on the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown, a time that challenged and tested us all but also provided opportunities for growth, kindness, and, dare we say, renewal?

The gospel reading today contains two sections: first, Jesus addresses tragic events of his time and calls his listeners to repentance, and second, he tells the parable of the barren fig tree, reminding us that God gives us time to turn back to Him and to live lives of fruitfulness.

The passage opens with a reference to a tragic event—Pontius Pilate’s violent suppression of some Galilean worshipers. Here he references a particularly dark event in which Pilate ordered his soldiers to attack a group of worshippers as they were in the Temple, mixing their blood with those of the sacrifices. It was, in modern parlance, a crime against humanity. Jesus’ listeners likely expected him to explain why this happened, perhaps even to blame the victims – had their sin brought down this terrible event on their own heads? Instead, Jesus shifts the focus, saying, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:2-3). He then references another disaster—the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, just to the south of Jerusalem’s Old City, which killed 18 people—and issues the same warning. These stories, of religious persecution and accident, might see straight out of a modern-day newspaper.

Jesus’ words challenge the assumption that suffering is always the result of personal sin, which was a theology prevalent in Jesus’ time. Instead, he calls us to reflect on the fragility of life. If the past five years have taught us anything, it is this: life is unpredictable, and hardship can come upon us suddenly. None of us foresaw the pandemic that changed the world, took lives, and disrupted daily existence. Like the people Jesus spoke to, we were confronted with uncertainty and, in many cases, sorrow. Yet the pandemic forced us to rethink priorities, drawing many of us closer to God, to family, and to acts of kindness. Perhaps now, five years later, we must ask ourselves: Have we learned the lessons? Have we grown in faith? Have we become more loving, more patient, and more committed to the things that truly matter? In other words, are we bearing fruit for the Kingdom?

Following his warning, Jesus shares a parable about a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. Year after year, he checked for fruit, but it produced nothing. Frustrated, he told the gardener to cut it down, but the kindly gardener pleads for one more year: “Leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down” (Luke 13:8-9). This story beautifully illustrates God’s patience with us. The fig tree had every opportunity to bear fruit, just as we have had every opportunity to live faithful, fruitful lives. The gardener’s plea reflects Christ’s role as our intercessor, nurturing us, giving us time, and calling us to transformation.

As we look back on the last five years, we might ask: Have we borne fruit in our lives? In the early days of the pandemic, we saw extraordinary acts of kindness—neighbours helping one another, frontline workers serving tirelessly, communities coming together in new ways. But have we maintained that spirit of generosity and compassion, or have we returned to old habits of

selfishness, impatience, and distraction? I suspect the answer is “both”. There is fruit being grown and shown, but there is always room on the branches for more.

What does it mean to bear fruit today? Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit: “love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are the marks of a life transformed by God’s grace. In practical terms, this might involve us continuing the habits of compassion and generosity we learned during the pandemic—checking on neighbours, giving to those in need, and supporting our communities. It may also mean deepening our faith through prayer, worship, and Scripture, ensuring that our spiritual roots are strong. Or it could involve us using our talents and time for God’s glory, whether through acts of service, mentoring others, or sharing the hope of Christ with those around us.

God has given us time—not to be wasted, but to be used for good, time to bear fruit. Perhaps, like the fig tree, we need some spiritual tending, the “ground” around us digging and our roots fertilising. Lent is the perfect time of year to engage in some digging and fertilising. The pandemic was a difficult season, but it also provided us with a chance to rethink what really matters. Five years later, we must not lose sight of those lessons. God has granted us more time; let us use it wisely and continue to bear fruit. As we mark the fifth anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, let us do more than simply remember. Let us recommit ourselves to living fruitfully. Let us carry forward the lessons of love, resilience, and faithfulness that emerged in those difficult days. May we, like the fig tree tended by the gardener, respond to God’s patience by flourishing in His grace.

May the Lord bless us and guide us as we seek to bear fruit in His name. Amen.