

READING: I Corinthians 10.1-13

Paul seeks shadowy parallels to Christian Baptism and Eucharist in episodes in the story of Israel's wanderings into the wilderness.

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL: Luke 13.1-9

Jesus gives a stern warning of the need for repentance.

Praise to you, O Christ, King of eternal glory.

The Lord is a great God,

O that today you would listen to his voice.

Harden not your hearts.

Praise to you, O Christ, King of eternal glory.

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them - do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

This is the Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Sermon for 23rd March 2025

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In many ways, this is familiar imagery from Jesus’ teachings. Images of farming and gardening bring with them ideas of growth and of flourishing. The vineyard is a symbol which crops up (if you’ll excuse the pun) at various points – Jesus as the true vine and his followers at the branches, or the Father as owner of the vineyard which has been rented by bad farmers who mistreat his son. In today’s Gospel those familiar idea are sharpened by a tone of urgency. The fig tree needs to bear fruit, it has been failing to do so and is at the point of destruction. The gardener asks for one more year to allow a transformation: he will take the drastic action of trenching round the roots and give his most lavish attention to the tree, in hopes of it showing that it really can be fruitful and worthwhile.

There is a “apocalyptic” note in this parable, if we mean by “apocalyptic” the feeling that time is growing short. The world is coming to a crisis, to a turning point. It’s later than we think. It’s striking that plant imagery can imply the natural, cyclical turning of the seasons, but here that ebb and flow of growth and rebirth is cut across by a demand that this season is the final one. This is when it will be revealed. The story clearly has something to do with Jesus’ own awareness of his own coming death as a turning point, as well as a feeling that people may find in their own lives that it is later than they think, that there come times when embracing God’s grace and mercy may be urgently necessary.

Reading, and rereading this passage over the last week, there was another tone to it which I couldn’t quite pin down – another atmosphere which it summoned up. Eventually I worked out what it was. Now, if I say the names “Mapp” and “Lucia”, some of you may know what I mean. Others of you have a treat in store. Mrs Emmeline Lucas and Miss Elizabeth Mapp, more usually known as “Mapp and Lucia” are the two heroines, or perhaps anti-heroines, of a series of novels by E.F. Benson. In the genteel seaside town of Tilling they live in a state of constant and lively snobbery. Imagine if Hyacinth Bucket had lived in the 1930s, and had a gay best friend. They strive against each other in a social

battle of garden parties, afternoon teas, and musical soirees, with each trying to establish herself as the acknowledged social queen of Tilling. The books have been made into TV series on two occasions – in the 1980s Geraldine McEwan and Prunella Scales played them, and a couple of years ago the BBC broadcast a series with Anna Massey and Miranda Richardson in the title roles.

This week's gospel reading reminded me very strongly of a passage from one of those novels early in the sequence, entitled *Queen Lucia*. On looking it up I found it was even closer than I had thought to the Biblical story. It begins with a character called Georgie going to see a friend, and finding her in her garden:

His first visit, of course, was to Daisy Quantock, but he meant to stay no longer than just to secure her and her husband for dinner on Sunday with Olga, and tell her the number of the house in Brompton Square. He found that she had dug a large trench round her mulberry tree, and was busily pruning the roots with the wood-axe by the light of Nature: in fact she had cut off all their ends, and there was a great pile of chunks of mulberry root to be transferred in the wheel-barrow, now empty of manure, to the wood-shed.

...

"My dear, [said Georgie], you're being rather drastic, aren't you? Won't it die?"

"Not a bit," said Daisy. "It'll bear twice as many mulberries as before. Last year there was one. You should always prune the roots of a fruit tree that doesn't bear. And the pearls?"

The pearls mentioned are not in fact the pearl of great price from another of Jesus' parables, but a part of the novel's plot. It continues in a comic strain, which the characters consulting what they think is a spirit during a séance, and it apparently predicting the death of Daisy's mulberry tree, and in fact turning out to be wrong because the mulberry tree does jolly well after the pruning and does bear fruit, and so on...

The connection between the two texts is quite striking – Daisy has a tree which has almost totally failed to bear fruit, and she is busily digging a trench around it, putting manure on,

and predicting that next year she will be proved right and it will produce plenty of fruit. Perhaps this echo of the Biblical parable should not as surprising as it first appears, since the author E.F. Benson, had a brother who was a Catholic priest and a father who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Clearly a family who knew their Bibles pretty well. But the connection did surprise me, I suppose because I don't tend to think of the Mapp and Lucia novels in the same atmosphere as the parables.

The novels are comic, provincial, very English. They tell of small-town life with its petty feuds and oneupmanship, with stories of jumble sales and bridge evenings. They are about life lived in a small way, about the familiar and the small-scale. The parables, on the other hand, feel different in their atmosphere. They are hot and dry, full of images of dust and vineyards, of sudden floods in narrow gullies, and grain scattered on stony paths. They're not gossipy and circumstantial, they are stark and even apocalyptic.

But perhaps E.F. Benson's borrowing of the parable for his Mapp and Lucia story tells me something about how we have to read these parables. They have to be both. They must be as familiar as an afternoon in a seaside town, as close to us as a cup of tea. But they must also be striking and immediate, showing us dust and stones, corn and crows. Benson was right to echo this parable, because if Jesus's sayings do not fit into our everyday world then we are reading the Bible wrongly. As our creed says, through him everything was made, and that includes scones and grass and shovels. But those sayings must also call us out of that world, must show us that this is not all there is. Their message cannot wait until we're settled, or until we've seen how things play out, or until we're in a more Bible sort of mood. They meet us in the everyday, confronting us with the urgency of grace which can arrive in the midst of our normal lives. They call us to bear fruit, and tell us that the time is now.

Amen.