

Sermon Third Sunday of Lent 2025 – *Seize the Day*

*Gather ye rose-buds wile ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.*

*The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.*

So wrote the Revd. Robert Herrick in his poem *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*. The ancient Roman poet, Horace, expressed something similar when he wrote '*carpe diem*', or 'seize the day.' An old English aphorism is to say 'Time gets away with us'; or, 'Time waits for no one.' I remember a wise old priest giving me a grave warning once when I wanted to delay going off to a theological college: 'Watch it,' he said pointing a threatening finger, 'The years have a habit of multiplying and flying by.'

None of us can escape time, although I'm convinced we all experience time differently. I'm one of those people who never has enough time – I'm very rarely ever bored (unless I'm forced to go to some kind of event which I don't

enjoy) as there's just so much that is interesting to do in a day. Others find the day drags.

All of us have to grapple with time though – all of us have deadlines, whether those deadlines be exams, coursework, getting seeds planted in the garden before you miss the opportunity for the year, making a deal before it's too late, and so on. We all have one universal deadline, of course: all of us have the deadline of our deaths. Psalm 39 ends with those chilling words: 'Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears. Turn your gaze away from me...before I depart and am no more.'

The passage of time, and the final deadline of our deaths is at the fore of our Bible readings today. In our Gospel reading, Jesus makes reference to two groups of people who died unexpectedly: those who were slaughtered on Pilate's orders whilst participating in sacrifices in the temple (probably because of some uprising, and we know from other historical sources that when the Romans put down a rebellion they did not play); and those who were killed by the tower of Siloam when it fell down.

Then, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree which bore no fruit. The owner of the tree orders the gardener to cut it down (if fig trees don't bear fruit within three years, they usually don't bear fruit at all and are a waste of time from an eating point of view). The gardener bargains for time,

persuading the owner to give it one more year. If no fruit comes in one year, however, that's it – the fig tree is gone.

Jesus is saying two things here. One: you have no idea when you are going to die. Pilate, or a falling tower can turn up at any moment. And because of that, you need to listen to the parable of the fig tree: you may have another year to bear spiritual fruit, to turn to God, but don't bank on having another a year after that. Bear fruit now or never. The parable of the unfruitful fig tree is similar to the story in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark of Jesus cursing a fig tree upon his final arrival in Jerusalem before his arrest and crucifixion; he comes to a fig tree with no fruit, curses it, and the next day the tree is found dead.

Biblical scholars have pointed out that in the Bible the fig tree is a symbol for the state of Israel. God sent the prophets in the Old Testament to warn the Israelites that if they didn't stop committing abominations – such as idolatry, murder, oppression of the poor, and so on – their time was going to be up. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree before his death is symbolic that the time was up – God would now do something new after those he came to save would not listen.

Our reading from Isaiah today is an extremely beautiful one of God inviting people who thirst to come and quench their thirst; to buy wine and milk, to eat what is good. But there is a warning: 'Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near..' Don't wait for a time to turn to God, as time is running out. There is a

deadline for ancient Israel, just as we have deadlines in our own lives.

This is true for you sitting here today. You, and I, have a spiritual deadline. When it comes to our faith, I have said here before that we can too often procrastinate about God, we can put off making changes to our lives which will bring us closer to God, assuming that we have the time. Well, we can't assume, and this is why there is so much urgency in the Scriptures when it comes to our faith. Get on with it! The Scriptures cry. Don't just say you'll pray at some point in the future; don't put off doing those good deeds for when you're fully ready; don't treat God like a consumable product to be picked off the shelf when you have the time for him. God is our most precious friend, a friend here and now. We are all, like the fig tree, asked to bear spiritual fruit; but we all, like the fig tree, have a deadline. Delaying our faith is the work of the devil. And if you feel like you can't change your life because it's too difficult, listen to the words of St Paul in our second reading: '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...'

None of us can control time; time happens whether we like it or not. That goes for things which happen in life too, even bad things. We are, ultimately, not in control. Our second reading seems to suggest that bad things happen to those who do bad things. However, Jesus says otherwise in the Gospel, pointing out that the Galileans

slaughtered by Pilate were no worse sinners than others; and neither were the victims of the tower of Siloam worse sinners. Bad things happen to bad and good people alike. In the book of Job, Job's counsellors try to persuade him that he must have done something wrong, he must have sinned, to deserve what God was allowing to happen to him; this wasn't the case, it being that more was going on in the universe than Job or any other human beings could know about. And, of course, Jesus was the best human to ever live – yet, an extremely bad thing happened to him, he was crucified. Because we are not in control – and it's lunacy to ever think that humans are in control or understand everything – we will never know why bad things happen, however difficult that is.

Jesus' point when he says 'unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did', is not to say that if you go away and be good boys and girls nothing bad will ever happen to you. Rather, his point is fleshed out in the parable of the fig tree. You don't know when something bad is going to happen, so sort out your life and your relationship with God now before it's too late.

Sorting out our relationship with God now, before it's too late, is what Lent is about. Amen.