

3rd Sunday of Lent (C)

23rd March 2025

‘Barren fig-tree or burning bush?’

Ex 3: *I AM WHO AM*

Ps 102: *It is He who forgives all your guilt.*

1Cor 10: *The man who thinks he is safe must be careful.*

Lk 13:1–9: *A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard ...*

One of the notable differences between Mass as we celebrate it today in the ordinary form, and Mass as you would have experienced it before the Second Vatican Council is that we are able to hear *so much more of the Old Testament*. In the Tridentine Mass there was only ever one Scripture reading before the Gospel, and it was rarely from the OT. In fact up until the 1970s we used to hear less than 1% of the OT at Mass in the whole year ... Now, even just on Sundays we get to hear more like 4% of it (and nearer 14% if you include weekday Masses). It may still not sound like much, but with the OT weighing in at about 25,000 verses, even 4% is quite a bit.

Our OT reading today, on this 3rd Sunday of Lent, of all the events in the OT, is one of the most significant: perhaps *the* most important moment in the OT ... *God reveals Himself personally to Moses at Mount Horeb*. It’s the very start of the great events that will lead to the

Exodus, the dramatic rescue of the people of Israel from the clutches of Pharaoh, king of Egypt which took place in about 1250BC. This moment for Moses changed all of history for mankind. God revealed Himself in a profoundly new way: He revealed His sacred name, “*YHWH*” = “*I AM WHO AM*” ... and this is the name that is used for God throughout the OT (although it was so sacred a name that the Jews would always instead have said “The LORD” instead ... and our Bible at Mass does the same). But what strikes me as significant in this moment is that whereas God could have imposed His *majesty and glory* — this is His great manifestation at a turning-point in history! — it is in fact an episode of *intense mercy*. God has revealed Himself in this new way to Moses because in fact He is concerned for His people. They are in dire straits in Egypt, and He is determined to pull them out of Egypt by a manifestation of power and glory on behalf of His people. He expresses an acute compassion for His oppressed people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At the heart of this experience for Moses is mercy: God’s

greatest attribute is His mercy (cf. Pope Francis).

The Gospel follows this up with one of many *parables of mercy* from the Gospel of Luke. We'll hear another next Sunday, and then on the 5th Sunday a dramatic moment in Jesus's ministry when He establishes beyond any doubt His desire to show mercy. Here in this parable, the vineyard-tender simply pleads for "one more year" ... *just one more year* to give the fig tree another chance to bear fruit. It's as if Jesus were walking amongst us, in the vineyard of His kingdom. Some of His people are producing the fruit He desires — the works of worship and belief in God; the love, care and compassion of others — but others of us in His kingdom are sadly not doing so ... God looks down lovingly on His kingdom and wants us all to flourish ... He doesn't want to see any of us wither and die in our sins and selfishness ... He wants us all to flourish as human beings from that spark of His immortality, that divine image that each one of us is. God looks down on us from on high, but simply desires that we grow and are beautiful in His sight. He is the vineyard

owner who is saddened if we are not bearing the fruit that He would wish of us ... But here alongside us, amongst us, is our great advocate ... the one who pleads for us, Jesus Christ. "Give me one more year," He cries: *Just give me one more year to work on this person ... allow me more chances to save this one too ... to inspire them to conversion, repentance and authentic love ... And see if I cannot bring them along to bear a little more fruit.*

Maybe we can re-cast this more specifically in terms of *Lent*. I think that the 3rd Sunday of Lent is maybe the right time to ask ourselves the pertinent, maybe pointed, question, "How is Lent going? ... What I set out to do, at the start of Lent 2½ wks ago — have I managed that? Have I kept to it? More or less? — or not at all?" Remember, our Lord set us three tasks at the start of Lent: *some fasting* ('giving myself less'); *some prayer* ('giving some more to God'); and *some almsgiving* ('giving more to others'). If we are serious about being Catholics, then we should be serious about keeping Lent. This isn't a season that should just pass us by. So — let's be honest. How

have we kept Lent so far? Does it feel different? We should *feel* that we are in Lent!

The images in Scripture today that we've been thinking about might help us. Specifically, the contrast of these *two trees* standing symbolically in today's readings: one which grabs the attention; the other which is unremarkable and is only worthy of being chopped down. One which is fully and supernaturally alive, *the burning bush* at which God appeared to Moses; and the other, half-dead, *the fig tree* of Jesus's parable which refuses to bear fruit. **The burning bush** was the scene of God's new and significant revelation to Moses and this encounter led to the *complete conversion* of his life to the work of God, to the mission of liberating God's people. **The fig tree** of Jesus' parable, instead, represents a person who has been continually *unwilling to be converted*, resistant to change, despite repeated efforts of the owner (i.e. God) to provoke a change, and stimulate the bearing of good fruit. But the whole point of Jesus's parable is that there *is* time: time to make a change. This is why it's a perfect reading for Lent.

There *is* another chance: this holy season of greater self-denial, prayer and giving. It's another opportunity for us to stop being someone unremarkable and spiritually half-dead, and to start being someone really blossoming with goodness. *This* is the beauty that God looks for in us ... this is the fruit He hopes for year by year ... that we are bright with His graces and blessings, laden with goodness and charity, firm in faith and truth. *Will this be the Lent* when He finds that we have made a loving choice to change, and to bear His fruit with joy and consistency?

God in Himself, of course, is quite remarkable ... as symbolized by that extraordinary sight of a bush on fire with love ($\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\eta$) and yet not being burnt up with passion ($\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$). We too, really alive in God, are going to be different, and worthy of notice (perhaps even a bit *unusual* in the eyes of some!). Are we willing to be a tree that is noticed, a tree that is remarked upon for being different? Are we willing in Lent to do the spade work, to do the manuring, to really let God get in to the places that matter, to dig deep around our roots and shake ourselves up, so as

to be something really much more beautiful for God: someone alive and shining in Him, flaming out but not burnt up? We can be this person; in Lent we can let God make us this person, freed from sin, fruitful and fresh, on fire for the Lord.

But we can only let God do this if we co-operate and give Him a chance this Lent. So, let's go back to that question: how is my Lent going? — what am I doing this Lent? What *should* I be doing this Lent? Do I want to be the barren fig tree that Jesus keeps coming to visit year after year and finding no change, no new fruit, no new goodness? Or do I want to be the bush that blazes out with the love of God, attracting to those around me a new and hopeful experience of God's love and tenderness? Which do I want to be? *Keeping Lent well this year could be the very thing that makes the difference.* Wouldn't that be great? To look back one day on one's spiritual life and say that Lent 2025 was the time when suddenly I took strength in my faith, and God gave me the courage to be truly a faithful and devout believer every day. *God can do this, if*

we ask Him! He is patient enough to await our repentance and can then transform us into something remarkable, a powerhouse of Christian love.

As long as we are ready to give Him the chance to work in us, as long as we are truly open to the workings of His renewal and forgiveness, then we know we will bear His fruit once again. Let's be sure that Lent has begun to help us examine our lives in the light of God's love and mercy. The various strands of Lenten practice are meant to help us do this, and thus also to lead us to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation with hearts desirous of a new holiness. We would not want the Lord to see us deliberately pass by the chance to be reconciled, forgiven, and made clean again, would we? (We just don't want to be that barren fig tree, do we?!) Let's allow Him to work that change in us this Lent! — for holiness, for fruitfulness, for charity, for being set free from sin.

It is He who forgives all your guilt, who heals every one of your ills, who redeems your life from the grave, who crowns you with love & compassion.