

Today's narrative is a continuation of Jesus' teaching which we started to explore last week; same location, same audience, same intention....of laying building blocks for understanding what it means and what it takes to become a true disciple of Christ.

Last week, I focussed on our natural inclination to judge others. Hopefully you took on board that it is only when we understand our own faults that we can truly help others see their own.

Now Jesus expands on his teaching through two very brief parables; (1) the Tree and its Fruit, and (2) the Wise and Foolish Builders.

Let's look at the tree and its fruit.

Jesus begins with a categorical statement that leaves no room for ambiguity. Only good fruit comes from a good tree, period! Jesus' audience would have clocked what he meant by his choice of fruits. By long standing tradition, fig trees were widely understood to be a symbol of fertility, peace and prosperity.

Similarly, grapes were a symbol of joy, particularly after sampling a glass or three of the fermented variety. They are suggested in sharp contrast to thorn-bushes and briars which were only fit to be used as firewood.

But unlike last week's example where the disciples would need to take action to remove the plank from their own eye, here their good deeds or fruit arise naturally. The fig grows naturally on the fig tree and the grape grows naturally on the grape vine.

That's not to say that no action needs to be taken; appropriate and timely pruning and watering are essential to maximise growth, but metaphorically speaking, the disciples' yield comes not through their hard work but their integrity as a good person.

In other words, their character; and character, like fruit, takes time to ripen and mature. Our character reflects our faith and vice versa. It is in the way we speak, act and live out our faith that our character is revealed and which, like good fruit is seen and hopefully desired by others.

And of course, we speak of the fruit of the Spirit as the natural harvest of the Holy Spirit's presence and working in the lives of maturing believers.

But let's not forget that whilst our character may be the visible sign of our good fruit, we need deep, unseen and well-watered roots in order for our character to flourish. Roots anchored in the teachings of Jesus which will not only enable us to flourish but also sustain us in bad times as well as good.

Today, the good tree metaphor should offer us the reassurance that a disciple's good character can and will act in a good way; where kindness, generosity, care and love for and of others flows naturally from the goodness of their faith filled hearts.

Now let's consider the final parable about the two builders.

And we return back to the need for action; but this time in response to Jesus's words and teaching. Jesus makes this point clear in verse 46 when he asks: *why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?* and illustrates what he means with his story about the two builders.

Interestingly, our bible gives the narrative the heading *The Wise and Foolish Builders* – the identical heading to a parable in chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel. In Matthew's parable Jesus specifically draws comparison between a wise and foolish builder but here in today's reading, the word wise or wisdom is never used.

I think the reason for that is because Jesus is teaching about obedience, not wisdom. Jesus is placing emphasis on the need not only to listen to what Jesus teaches, but also to act in good character upon those words, to listen carefully and act on what Jesus says.

And that, I think is where our greatest challenge lies today. Earlier in the chapter Jesus teaches about loving our enemy and giving to everyone who begs from us. Confession time.

Am I the only person who has crossed the road to avoid having a tin rattled at me? And am I the only one who has failed to truly forgive and love someone who metaphorically stabbed me in the back with cruel and spiteful words?

But please don't write me off just yet. I've come to recognise that as my faith matures and my character becomes more fruitful and heart centred, then it is becoming easier to remove the plank from my own eye and not only hear more clearly Jesus's words but also to act more naturally in response to what I've heard.

I'm human, I'm fallible, I'm certainly not perfect but I've noticed that the more I put Jesus's words and teaching into action, the more I'm able to cope with whatever storms blow into life.

Has anything I've said resonated with you? Do you sometimes struggle living out Jesus's teaching? Do you ever wonder exactly what underpins your faith?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, then maybe our Wednesday evening Lent course is for you. I'll give more details in the notices.

Amen

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 20/2/22