

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent

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Christ Church, Scarborough

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When I was old enough to get an allowance, a meager one, I began to buy things.

Oddly, I bought some plants.

On my way home from school, through the village of Westbury-upon-Trym, which had become a suburb of Bristol, I would pass Mogford's the Ironmonger (or in Canadian, Hardware Store). They sold everything, including plants. Outside the shop, on the sidewalk, they had a table of things on sale. Nestled among clothes pegs and rubber gloves there would sometimes be a cactus plant. It was these plants that attracted my attention. They were invariably damaged, and very cheap. I had a feeling it was their last stand before being thrown into the garbage. Over the years I bought several of these and carried them carefully home. They sat on the kitchen windowsill and were nurtured under my mother's direction. I had a soft spot for these plants. They sat there like a ward in a hospital for the seriously wounded and amputees. They stayed alive. But that was it.

It was perhaps three years after this small collection began that I visited a friend's house. In their kitchen too there were cactus plants. But....these were large, flourishing, and healthy. And, beyond my ability to comprehend, they had flowers on them. Beautiful flowers! I looked closely. Yes, from the stems and leaves and thorns, I could tell these were the very plants I had, but transformed.

It was not long after that that my plants left the windowsill and moved to the back garden to fend for themselves, and I think became compost.

As I was reading the story of the fig tree that Jesus tells the memory of these plants came back to me. It felt very familiar.

I think this is a worrying story. Having a soft spot for the broken and rejected is a moderately Christian virtue. We are encouraged to care for the orphan, the stranger, the homeless and the broken hearted. We are taught to be compassionate to the helpless and the hopeless.

And sometimes we think that this is enough. But just being nice to a fig tree, or a cactus, does not seem to be all that is required. The plant is supposed to produce something. Figs, flowers. Just sitting there looking pathetic is not enough.

So there seems to be a teaching here about two phases.

There is a time of mercy and there is a time of expectation.

We will receive God's mercy, help, healing and care while we are weak, broken or first coming to Christ. And we will then be called by God's expectation to become productive.

Oh, dear. This sounds like work!

I had a cardiac adventure about 10 years ago. I spent a couple of weeks in hospital. At first I was rather out of it, but as I got a bit better I found myself tended by kind and friendly nurses. "Family only" was the visiting rule so not even the bishop could get in. I began to realize how nice this was, and how stress-free. Slowly I recovered and was moved to "step down" care. I realized I did not want to go home. This was just too nice to leave behind. However, hospitals have a way of spotting this and they booted me out. Soon enough rest at home was replaced by being back in my church, and the wheels of work began to turn. Every now and then I think of how nice it was being sick!

Yes, it sounds like work!

Isaiah says "Anyone who thirst come to the waters! And you that have no money, come buy and eat!" He says, in effect, get nourished her by God. Seek God where he is to be found. Receive the forgiveness and grace he offers now. But eating and drinking are for those who are hungry and thirsty. Finding God is for the empty of soul and forgiveness is for those riven by guilt and shame. It is a transition time, not a way of staying in hospital for ever. You are supposed to move on.

Paul in Corinthians similarly chides his old converts. Simply being members of the church is not enough. The people who fled with Moses were "the children of Israel"; special, chosen and blessed. But they didn't pull their

socks up and get on with the task given them, and they were rejected by God. Like my cactus plants they were beaten down, helpless and broken. That is what slaves are. God redeemed them and took them, fed them and gave them drink. He gave them life, liberty and hope. But many of them chose to remain as dependants, without responsibility or vision, just looking for the easy way. "Enough," says God, "cut them down!"

The vineyard owner says of the tree, "This tree has had enough time and tenderness. It has been here long enough to get rooted and ready to give back. It is using up the soil that other plants could use. We'll give it just one more chance and then it's gone!"

I worry as an Anglican priest about my denomination, my church. We have so many parishes which seem to be just hanging on. They can remind me of the windowsill plants in my kitchen. I worry when Jesus looks at the Anglican Church in Canada, where so much of our energy and money goes just into keeping ourselves going. The roof fund needs topping up, the boiler needs repair, and the membership is tired and getting older. It is too hard for us to do new things in this ever-changing world. There is a temptation to see the church as a refuge from change, a defense against newness and a place to find comfort in an uncomfortable world. When I am feeling this it reminds me of the hospital I loved so much! Almost worth getting sick again! You almost want to say to God, "Can't I just be put in a quiet corner of your vineyard, where I can just be left in peace, without having to do too much?"

Somewhere else Jesus says "I came that you may have life, and have it in abundance!"

Jesus is not going to let us just shrink into "discipleship-retirement", either as individuals or as churches. Abundant life means getting back on the horse, or the bike, and getting back on with the Mission God has entrusted to us all.

We are to reach out to the broken, heal the sick, bring freedom to those chained up by drugs, by despair, by tiredness and depression. We are to lose our selves for the sake of the Gospel and let go of what we cling to, so that our hands may be empty to hold the hand of God, and the hands of his other children.

Let me tell you a secret. If you ever want to know what spiritual realities a preacher is wrestling with, listen to the sermon!

This challenge matters to me. At Grace Church God has intervened to salvage four churches heading inevitably towards closure. We amalgamated and we now have a big enough church to be able to make choices again. But the one choice we cannot make is to keep on doing what we did in the past. We know where that leads. No fruit, and no future.

We are scared and hopeful. We do not know the way, but we trust God does. All we can do is try things out, take risks, do our best and go forwards into an unknown future. We need to get out of the hospital-like safety of the 70's, 80's and so on. We need to realize our strength and use it. We need to take the risk of dying to our old way of being Anglican so that Christ can raise us up into a new way of carrying that tradition forward.

It regularly frightens me. I frequently think, "Oh, couldn't I just do the BCP I know and love, and the BAS is edgy enough, and we can have a bible study group, an ACW and all the things I know and feel safe with? Can't I God." But God seems to say to me "Get off your lazy butt David, and bear some fruit!"

So I urge you to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches, say in to us in Canada, to you in this congregation, and to you in your own personal discipleship to Jesus. Jesus warns us that there is a choice before us, and he takes away the pretense that there isn't. And he tells us that our choice has consequences. One is abundant life with risks, the other is uprooting and death. Chose Life!