

Fruit Fast

“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” --Luke 13:9

It's hard to let God be God. We long to explain things only God can know. We human beings have spent centuries to find cause and effect patterns for every good and every evil. Yet we can each tell stories of terrible tragedies that have happened to good and faithful people. Maybe they happened to you. We want to make sense of things that make no sense so we put words into God's mouth that are our own rather than God's. Jesus illustrates our misguided tendency in today's gospel reading. Two terrible tragedies had happened in Jerusalem. One group of people from Galilee were killed in a political skirmish while making offerings at church and in the other incident, a tower fell on 18 people, killing those who simply happened to be there. How can such things be explained?

This is the question Jesus poses. He asks the questions that must have been on people's minds. Had the Galileans done something wrong that God allowed them to be killed outside church? Were the people killed by the tower worse offenders than all others living in Jerusalem? Jesus answers his own question, "No," and then drops the bombshell "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." As always Jesus' answer from above, turns our questions from below, right on its head! First, he makes it clear that there is no rational explanation for these tragedies. It was not God's will. There was no meaning. These tragedies could have happened to anyone standing there. Hurricane Maria could have wiped out Tampa instead of Puerto Rico. God forbid, the mass shootings in Orlando at a gay club could have happened at a club one of our kids attend, the tragedies in Las Vegas or Texas could happen here in Pinellas.

In matters of life and death, Jesus is telling us to turn our attention toward our own lives—rather than speculate about others. What about your life? What about mine? We can spend so much time trying to explain things--so much time worrying about other people's lives that we forget to pay attention to our own lives with God. Every life is a pure gift from God, that no one did anything to deserve...and thus each death is a witness to the fragility of this beautiful gift of life. Let senseless deaths, any death, awaken you, says Jesus. We will all go this way, make sure you know why you are alive and who you are living for. This seems harsh, especially the "repent, you will all perish as they did," part. A lesser teacher would sugar coat this, as I am tempted, but Jesus loves us too much to lie to us. Life is real, it has purpose and it has a deadline. Yet our God is forbearing and merciful, and he concludes today's reading with the possibility of a deadline extension.

Jesus tells them a parable about a fig tree. 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?" In this parable Jesus is saying that, in a very real way, our lives and all of creation are God's garden. We are like beautiful fruit trees that God has planted, but the question is, are we bearing any fruit for God and for others as is our calling as Armenian Christians?

Look at your life and dare to ask the hard questions: Am I stingy in my love for others? Am I withholding forgiveness for old wrongs? Do I refuse to believe that I can be forgiven, carrying from year to year a growing burden of guilt? Am I so busy making a living that I've forgotten to make a life? As you may know, the parable of the fig tree does not end with the tree being cut down. Instead the gardener, Our Lord says, "Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and cultivate it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not you can cut it down." There's urgency and hope in the gardener's voice. "Give me a year--I'm not willing to give up on this tree." And our Lord is not ready to give up on us. Give us a year, we pray merciful God, that we might repent and live our life how it was intended. In this coming year Lord, come to us, cultivate our hearts, open to us your wisdom, your forgiveness, and your grace--now and always;--amen.