

“So, cut it down!”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, the newspaper carried a photo of some prisoners on a work-release program. They were restoring a condemned house on the city’s West End. Days later, one of the prisoners wrote the editor, saying:

“Thank you for the coverage... The last time my name and photo were in the paper appeared the day I was sentenced... So, it was a real joy to see my picture in your paper doing something good. When I entered prison 18 months ago, I was a lot like that house we just remodeled.... BUT, God took charge of my life and made me a new creation in Christ.”

We could hardly find a better illustration of the point Jesus is making in today’s Gospel, which I just read to you from St. Luke.

The **1st** half of the Gospel tells about 2 groups of people who are killed by recent tragedies in Jerusalem. Jesus ends his references to these tragedies by saying to his listeners:

“If you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.”

The **2nd** half of the Gospel tells about a fig tree that was planted inside a vineyard. A vineyard is an ideal place for a fig tree to grow. If a fig tree couldn’t grow there, it couldn’t grow anywhere. Interestingly, a fig tree takes 3 years to mature. If it doesn’t bear fruit by that time, it probably won’t ever bear fruit. And that’s why the owner of the vineyard told the gardener to cut the tree down.

And so, it is remarkable that, instead of cutting the tree down, the gardener begs to give it a **2nd chance**.

“Leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it & fertilize it,” he says.

Jesus intended his parables for **2** groups of people. **1st**, Jesus meant them for the instruction of the people of his time. **2nd**, he meant them for the instruction of people of all time.

Today’s parable is, obviously, meant for the people of Israel. Jesus tells them that God gave them a choice in his plan and took special care of them. **BUT**, they didn’t bear fruit. Jesus tells them further that, in spite of this failure, God will be patient with them a little longer.

The wider group of people for whom Jesus told this parable includes all of us here today. We are like the people of Israel, in that God has given us a choice in his plan and he has taken special care of us. God expects us to bear fruit... the very reason he gave us a soul—with an intellect and freedom of choice. **BUT**, if we don’t bear fruit, then, like Israel, God will still give us a chance to repent... i. e., a **2nd chance**! If we don’t repent and choose to bear fruit, then, like Israel, we will, ultimately, perish.

This brings me back to my opening story. Both the prisoner and the house illustrate the point of Jesus’ parable. Both were, in a way, given a **2nd chance**.

“How so?” you ask.

Well, I am glad you asked that question!

The house was condemned by the city. It was scheduled to be torn down. **BUT**, someone persuaded the officials to, in effect, give it a **2nd chance**. They said:

“Let the prisoners work on it. If they can make it a useful property again, why tear it down?”

The prisoner, like the house, was condemned. He was considered unfit to live in society. So, he was caged. Although, society gave up on him, had had enough with him, Jesus hadn’t. Jesus gave him a **2nd chance**. Like the gardener, Jesus watered and cared for his spirit. The man chose to respond and became, as St. Paul would say, **a new creation**!

All of us can relate to that story to some degree or another. At one point in our lives, many here today were like that fig tree, the house, and the prisoner. We, too, were in danger of being rejected as being useless. **BUT**...in his mercy, God took pity on us. Like the house, the prisoner, and the fig tree, we were given another chance.

Today's Gospel, therefore, calls forth from us deep gratitude to God for the **2nd** chance he has given us. It calls forth a deep determination to make the most of our **2nd** chance. So, we say to Jesus:

"Thank you, Lord Jesus, for our **2nd chance. Help us make the most of it. Help us carry out your plan for us. Help us do this especially during the remaining weeks of Lent...perhaps by meeting you more in the Eucharist."**

I will now close with a story about an old violin, which, like us, was given a **2nd** chance. It is, quite possibly, an image of **your story and my story... and God's love for us.** Perhaps it will move us to celebrate today's Eucharist with more than ordinary gratitude and love.

*"It was battered and scarred... and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while to waste much time on the old violin. **BUT**...he held it up with a smile.*

'What am I bid, good folks?' he cried. 'Who'll start the bidding for me? A dollar, a dollar, then two, only two? Two dollars and who'll make it three?

*Three dollars once and three dollars twice, and going for three, **BUT** no!'*

From the room, far back, a gray-haired man came forward & picked up the bow. And wiping the dust from the old violin & tightening the loosened strings, he played a melody pure & sweet, sweet as an angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer, in a voice that was quiet and low said:

'What am I bid for the old violin?' And he held it up with the bow.

'A thousand dollars and who'll make it two? Two thousand and who'll make it three? Three thousand once, three thousand twice and going and gone!' said he.

The people cheered and some of them cried:

'We don't quite understand. What changed its worth?

Quick came the reply:

'The touch of the Master's hand.'

And many a man with life out of tune... and battered and scarred with sin... is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd, much like the old violin.

A mess of potage, a glass of wine, a game..., and he travels on.

He's going once, he's going twice, he's going and almost gone.

*****BUT**... the Master comes and the foolish crowd never can quite understand...
the worth of the soul and the change that is wrought...***

By the touch... of the Master's hand!"

May the Master of all time & space touch your mind and your heart and your soul.

May our Abba bless you....the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.