

The Judgement of our Anxieties

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Second Sunday of Lent, Year C—17 March 2019

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3: 17-4: 1; Luke 13: 1-9

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Let me take some liberties with today's Gospel parable, in order to help us understand it better—and to help us learn how we people of faith can get the better of our anxieties.

Imagine that you're a fig tree and you're not feeling especially chipper. In fact, you're feeling it might be your turn for the wood chipper! You're fearful, perhaps, or you're experiencing anxiety, which is a more diffuse, less specific version of fearfulness—"fearfulness lite", if you like.

Now, every attentive Bible reader knows that the fig tree is a symbol of Israel, so that Gospel stories or parables about fig trees are really about the fears and failures and the more hopeful prospects of God's people. Fig tree stories are less about horticulture, and land clearing, then, and more about trust and faithfulness. That's the clue. And we see a connection to our two texts from the Old Testament today, from Genesis and the Psalms. Abram the father of faith is anxious about his posterity, his legacy, about his exposed place in the world, and the shame of childlessness. As for the psalmist, he's engaged in the fight of his life with real opponents, as Israel and Judah and their Kings so often were. Both Abram and the psalmist are encouraged to face their anxieties by holding on to God's promises, which they both do, and this is what having faith means.

Now, back to our nervous fig tree. The landowner shows up with a low opinion of the fig tree, and with well-advanced plans for land reclamation. And look who the landowner is: it's Peter Dutton! He tells the gardener that this fig tree is a waste of space, that it's a financial burden, that it doesn't belong, and that it'll have to go. So what are we supposed to make of this landowner, and who's the gardener? I'll come back to that. But first let's return to the earlier part of today's Gospel parable, which shows us the anxious mindset at work through one of its main features.

Here in today's gospel we have an interesting exchange about two events fresh from news of the day: there was a sort of Bloody Sunday event in which Pilate's occupation troops killed a number of religious pilgrims in Jerusalem, and there was a local disaster in which a tower collapse killed 18 people—a bit like the recent plane crash in Ethiopia, or that highway sign in Melbourne falling on a woman's car. And of course this weekend, with last Friday's terrorist atrocity in Christchurch fresh and raw in our minds, we have much to be anxious about as a community. Jesus' hearers seek to ward off their anxiety in the face of such events. They do it by trying to blame the victims for their own misfortune. That way, they can deflect their anxiety, and repress it. "Surely this sort of thing won't happen to us, because we're good people."

And don't we see plenty of this attitude still today? Independent Senator Fraser Anning, too far right for our most far-right parties, has just declared that too much Muslim immigration is the cause of violence, so the fifty dead and the dozens wounded in Christchurch thanks to a far-right fanatic have only themselves to blame—which is exactly what we see Jesus refusing to countenance in today's gospel.

But there are far less outrageous examples, and far closer to home. I used to fill in for a hospital chaplain when I was a parish priest in Brisbane back in the day. Patients would

regularly complain to me that they didn't deserve their heart disease or their cancer because of their exercise and their diet and their non-smoking. In other words, other people deserved to be sick but not them, hence the surprise and even the outrage that they felt. And, as I'm sure you know, this sense of affront towards God in the face of misfortune is a major reason why churchgoing people give up their faith. God should have treated them better, they think, because they deserved it. But, friends, Jesus knows that we're fragile and sinful creatures, not invincible beings armoured by moral rectitude. He knows that suffering is an inevitable consequence of our creaturely finitude, and that it comes for all of us. And so he condemns this victim blaming in today's gospel. Instead, as St Paul reminds us today, Jesus' willingness to face suffering in an attitude of faith is something we Christians must come to understand, and seek to imitate whenever it's appropriate. Without that change of heart, that repentance, Jesus is telling us that we'll perish just like the victims mentioned in today's gospel, which I take to mean that we'll face our inevitable deaths without understanding and without spiritual resources.

In our wider world today we face a new range of threats and hence a new set of anxious avoidance behaviours. Indulge me while I mention two of them.

In the face of climate change, we're now seeing a retreat from global engagement into a new nationalistic parochialism and a new tribalism. "Let's look after number one and shut everyone else out." "Let's forget about solidarity with the third world poor and cutting greenhouse gas emissions, and instead let's just get what we can out of a declining situation." More and more writers about today's global threats aren't even making the case for climate change any more, they're taking it for granted and just getting on with naming and trying to think through its implications. Coastal flooding and a world full of climate refugees are two main risks we face, which military strategists around the world are already planning for. And this week we heard that our Reserve Bank is busy modelling the likely economic impacts of climate change, while many in our supposedly free-market government are still clinging to the fetish of coal, just when renewable energy is becoming the cheaper option.

Friends, here we see yet more anxious avoidance and denial, rather than facing the facts and admitting culpability and seeking to address the crisis. The French political philosopher Bruno Latour criticizes today's super-rich for being eager climate change deniers in public while paying huge sums to insulate their lifestyles from its worst effects in private. They don't want the game to change—the game in which they're the winners. Because, think what a radically simpler way of life would mean for the winners in our present growth economy, and where would global solidarity leave these winners without a world of losers to envy them?

Another example. I've been reading a scandalous piece of in-depth investigative journalism by a Frenchman, Frédéric Martel, that's just been published worldwide in nine languages. It's called *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy*. The author plausibly argues that up to 80% of clergy staff and leaders at the Vatican are closet gays, some of whom don't practice while many do. Here is a world where gay boys, especially from Latin countries, could be safe from scrutiny in the priesthood, where they'd have a secure berth for life, where they could make something of themselves, and where they could escape scrutiny. So priests, bishops and even cardinals cruising the beats in civvies is well known to the Rome police, though it's typically ignored or hushed up. Here we have a powerful cohort seeking to control the Church, and advancing those priests and bishops who play its double game, while keeping its presence hidden behind strident opposition to gay liberation, same sex marriage, the use of condoms against AIDS, and every other right wing enthusiasm that we've seen the Vatican embrace in recent decades. And as for child abuse, this bigger culture of secrecy is

frightened of exposure, so that Vatican authorities have been loath to take on the abusers because of what else might come out about them.

In light of all this you can imagine the travails of that faithful pastoral bishop, Pope Francis. The sort of grassroots Church he imagines—not so centralized in Rome, not so frightened of women, and certainly not so hung up about sexuality, even homosexuality—would mean an end to an unreformed Roman Curia maintaining its stranglehold on power. My friend Fr James Alison, the gay catholic theologian, tells me that the only unforgivable sin in this closeted world is to be openly gay and to say there's nothing wrong with that. And because so many people now agree, including more and more Catholics, we see a stark fall-off in vocations to the Catholic priesthood in the West. Young gay men no longer feel they need a safe hiding place to live worthwhile lives, which the priesthood used to provide.

Friends, my point here is essentially St Paul's point in today's epistle: that the challenge of faithfulness in the face of vulnerability, the challenge of managing our anxiety through our faith, is what we see Christ doing. In turn it's what Paul himself does, and this is what we're invited to imitate. Not for Paul a version of Christian godlessness that anaesthetizes itself against the threats of life. Not like the global rich, who live increasingly segregated from the poor and from exposure to the threats of climate change. And certainly not like those cardinals in the Vatican named in Martel's book, with their lavish apartments, with their handsome young "houseboys" or "personal assistants" or "nephews" or "chauffeurs," along with their rigidly homophobic public profiles, and who never seem to be short of money thanks to their far right political cronies back home.

Now, friends, what does God do with all this? Are we simply condemned in today's Gospel—condemned by God in fearful terms that have driven many into postures of denial: bigots, abusers, climate change deniers on the make, the schizophrenic Vatican of Frédéric Martel, and all the rest of us who so easily fall into similar denial, similar dissembling, similar anxious avoidance of our fragility and finitude, similar resistance to faith?

The good news about anxiety is that it can reveal our situation to us. Heidegger wrote that anxiety disrupts our sense of agency, of living confidently in a meaningful world, and hence it exposes our real selves, though we typically flee from this revelation into inauthentic ways of living. Kierkegaard wrote more positively, linking anxiety to the discovery of new possibilities. And, so, anxiety can be a worthwhile stimulus for spiritually-minded people. Here I think we're in tune with what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel. He doesn't want his hearers to flee from their anxiety into blaming others for their misfortunes. But he doesn't want them to feel defeated, either.

And so I return to today's gospel parable. We tend to think that God is the landowner and that the message is one of condemnation for God's people, if we don't shape up and fly right. Earlier passages about judgement in Luke, Chapter 12, can reinforce this way of reading it, at the expense of the more gracious and encouraging passages in Luke 12 that actually give us the key. So, let me lay it out for you.

Is the landowner in the parable God. No! That's why I suggested that we imagine him as Peter Dutton. God is not a disapproving compliance Nazi who takes no prisoners, whose woodchipper is being revved up as we speak, waiting for the fragile and anxious fig tree. This figure of threat and accusation is much more familiar to us as Satan, putting us down, making us forget that we're actually God's beloved people just as we are, and that God is not in the business of condemning and damning. No, our accusing voices do that, and we humans do it to others, as I've been trying to illustrate in various ways this morning. But God's not like that.

And if I'm right, who's the gardener then? Who's that attentive, caring and strong one in today's gospel parable who sticks up for us, who'll work with the fragile and anxious fig tree confident that new possibilities are within reach, confident that the crisis can be averted? Friends, if Peter Dutton plays the impatient landowner for us in today's Gospel parable, who should play the gardener? From the ABCs Gardening Australia, yes, it's Costa! It's the luxuriously bearded and irrepressible Costa, who loves his garden and all the plants in it and who won't give up on any of them.

And in turn who does Costa represent, who is this patient and tenacious gardener? Friends, of course it's Jesus himself. Jesus is the face of God's judgement, who promises not scorched earth but new beginnings, who calls us to the anxious adventure of new possibilities, who wants us to fall into a scary hope and not into a nervous despair. Friends, this is God's good news for us: not the bad news that makes us behave in all the dysfunctional ways that I've been outlining this morning—as ordinary individuals do, and governments, and global high flyers, and even Churches too. In place of our anxiety about being fragile and finite and fallible, we're offered instead the anxiety of new possibilities with Jesus Christ. And it's a fruitful anxiety, as God judges us and begins our rehabilitation. That's what faith means.

The Lord be with you ...