

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent

“A man had a fig tree planted in a vineyard.”

+INJ+

The man is God the Father, and the fig tree is humanity.

In the beginning, the Father planted the tree of Adam within the vineyard of Eden. There He gave Adam his divine mission, his purpose: *Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and have dominion over the earth.*”

Most modern exegesis has found in these commands a simple exhortation to have children, to spread across our planet, and to steward it for our benefit. Though it is the case that mankind should and has done these things, this interpretation does not begin to approach the mystical depth implied in the original languages; the breadth of the task implied in these commands which the Early Church intuitively understood.

To be fruitful does not mean to reproduce, but to come to maturity, for a tree does not bear fruit until it has grown and reached its final state. To be fruitful means to be what one was meant to be, to fulfill the potential in one’s nature. This is the command given to Adam: “Fulfill who you are, become a true man,” that is, become what the Father intended you to be before all time in creation, *“in the image of God, after his likeness.”*

‘And having become a true man, multiply, increase, that the crown of creation, the glorified man might reign everywhere.’ For it is necessary that no part of creation not be filled with the majesty of man’s glory.

Then we hear the third command given to Adam, the third stage of his mission, so to speak, that is, *‘to fill the earth.’* This is better translated ‘to fulfill the earth,’ that is to bring all of creation to its completion and end; for sinless man, being united to God, would unite all of creation to God in his own person, thus

bringing to pass the everlasting song of the angels, that 'heaven and earth be full of the glory of God.'

Here then comes the final command: "*have dominion over the earth,*" or perhaps better understood, "be lord of the earth," be God to the creation, even as the Father is God to mankind. Man as God's viceroy to the cosmos.

This the Father desires of our first parents, Adam and Eve, that having created all, He, in His love, might bring all into participation with Himself through mankind.

And yet, it is written, "*A man had a fig tree planted in vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, but he found none.*"

Herein lies the tragedy of mankind; that having received from God's infinite love the privilege of participating in the perfect union of heaven and earth, of creation and the uncreated, he despised his purpose, and sought another.

It is written: "*And the man said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none.'*" For it is true that in the three ages of man, these three 'years,' man has been utterly unfruitful; far from growing up into his full maturity, with each age he falls deeper and deeper into the abyss; our corruption increasing day after day, a cancer devouring our nature.

For the first year is that of the Garden of Eden, wherein sinless Adam was deceived by the serpent, and partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; having taken of the tree of death, Adam was prohibited from taking of the tree of life, and so the tree of his humanity began its age-long withering, its slow approach to desiccated lifelessness. The fall of man may be likened to the autumn, the fall of a year, which ends in a winter, lifeless, cold, dark.

The second year is that of the giving of the Law; for having received the Law by the hands of Moses, all goodness and love was presented before mankind in Israel; a path was given to man, whereby he might repent, and return to his God; and yet it was as the prophet Isaiah said: "*What more could I do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield good grapes, why did it yield only wild grapes?*"

Having received the knowledge of the complete goodness of God in the

Law, Israel turned to the baseness and wildness of the golden calf. They would not seek the purity of the words of the Law, etched on immaculate stone; but rather turned to worship the baseness and carnality of a cow.

And not only in the wilderness did they '*worship the creation and not the creator,*' for again and again Israel spat on the God of creation, and turned to Ba'al, and Ashtaroath and Molech, and to their corrupt worship, which indulged every disorder of corrupt human nature. Fruitless Israel. Fruitless humanity.

Then comes the third year, the year of the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in the flesh. He comes preaching to many the kingdom of God; He comes preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins; He comes offering the free entrance of all into the fullness of the being of God; but He has entered into the winter of humanity's soul.

For the Jews of His time no longer could remember their ancient mission, they no longer cared for sacred things. What they longed for was power, earthly power, to liberate them from Roman power. Their eyes could not bear to see the divine glory offered them, for being under the yoke of Imperial rule so long, they envied only temporal glory.

The third year had come, and again mankind had shown no fruit; he had not come to his true purpose and end, even having been given guidance by the Word of God, first on stone, then in flesh. So it is written: "*Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down.*" The divine patience of the Father seems to have worn thin, and '*the wrath of God is revealed against all unrighteousness,*'

For in rejecting the counsel of his Son, it was made manifest that "*the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*" What option is left? "*I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.*" "*I have come seeking fruit of this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down.*"

How close all of us are to destruction; see how visible the wrath of the Father is against all wickedness, for He desires that mankind come to fruition, but we in our rebellion incessantly cast our vote for corruption, for un-being, for non-existence. And so the wrath of God is made manifest; the decree of hell is laid at

the root of sinful mankind: *'Let them perish by their own will.'*

But it is written: *"The vinedresser answered him, 'Lord, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.'" The Son of God intercedes on our behalf before the Father, "Lord, the tree is sick unto death, and of itself cannot produce any fruit; but only let me replant it and nourish it, and perhaps it will be well."*

Now do you see what Christ is saying? Do you see the *via dolorosa*, the path of suffering which our Lord trod on the Friday of our Redemption, bearing the wood of his passion?

That is not merely Jesus, but the vinedresser; see how He carries the tree of our sins, lifeless, dead, and not only dead, but death-giving; see how the vinedresser has dug us up to replant us upon Mount Zion; see how He waters us with his life-giving blood, see how He lays down His torn flesh to nourish our roots. We see our Lord bearing His cross to His death; what He bears is the fig tree of our sinful humanity.

The parable ends: *'Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'*

There is something despairing about this ending; it leaves uncertain whether or not the tree will indeed bear fruit, whether or not the dying tree of mankind might be saved. Was the shedding of Christ's blood on the way for nothing? Was the scourging of His body to no avail? Are we so sick, so dead, that even being nourished by the sufferings of Christ, we cannot be saved?

But do not despair. Rather, look again to our Lord's Passion, look again to the vinedresser's labor; see the tree of the cross planted high up upon the mount of Sacrifice. Look upon its branches, and see hanging from them, finally, the fruit of the tree of mankind.

The fruit which the man in the parable sought has been born. Indeed mankind has finally come to its completion in the sacrifice of the Son of Man. God created man to *'be in his image, after his likeness.'* And Jesus is the Image of God, He is the likeness of God, for *'God is love,'* and Jesus shows Himself to have fulfilled the Law of Love in His self-offering for the sake of mankind.

And we are united to this new tree of mankind, replanted and restored, through Baptism. By the washing of regeneration, we are grafted onto the tree of humanity, now healed from all corruption and made strong, now brought to its fulfillment and fullest fruition through Christ.

The tree of life has been restored in Zion. Though we fast during the days of Lent, let us feast on this day of the Lord, Sunday, when no one fasts. Approach the table of God and take the fruit of the tree of life.

Eat the fruit of the sacred supper, and unite yourself to the glorified body and blood of Christ, that His majesty might be multiplied in the many people in whom He now dwells through His feast; take Him into yourself, that He might fulfill His creation in you and cast out the devil from your soul, that He alone might rule within the throne of your heart.

Draw near to the Lord's altar, that the Son of God may complete the mission given Him of the Father:

"Be fruitful, and multiply, and fulfill the earth, and have dominion over it."

+INJ+

Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Ezekiel 33:7-20; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.