

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Lent: Disturbance and Manure

- not to put too fine a point on it; that's a definition of Lent for this Sunday. I suppose the poor tree in the story has to represent the life I have lived; but I instantly remember the line which Paul spoke without any loss of modesty: "*His grace in me has not been fruitless.*" We don't have to be vain people to recognise that we have produced real fruit for God. We are not here to cultivate false ideas of our life - quite the reverse. *The Lord takes delight in his people*, and that must be the dominant note of our self-understanding; never forget that God loves you with an eternal intensity that will never lose its power to restore and save you. In the end, we are *wanted* by God, and that is our everlasting charter, our reason for being here, and our hope. How much deeper that is than the worldly business of justifying our existence, convincing the authorities that we are worth preserving! We don't have to reapply for our position in the world; it is God's gift to us, and that is a guarantee of his favour.

### A Tree - A Living Thing

Of course, our nature is a growing one, and everything that grows can be seen as imperfect. The processes of growing and changing *always* appear as partly destructive, partly even punishing. How does it feel, do you suppose, for your buds to break through your bark, or your petals to fall off, or your leaves to come drizzling around you and lie around your feet in pools of decay? Recognise the feeling? You bet! A tree never stays the same, and the process carries with it some certain distress. We are bound to lose at several points of the cycle, and it is easy to experience the harsh disturbance of our roots, the distressing arrival of the manure-bucket that will shock us into being what we should be, what we should long to be. The art is in learning how to welcome the disturbance, how to work with the gardener and not against him.

### Pilate and the Galileans

Jesus wants to tell his listeners how delicate is their hold on life. The life of the tree is in danger, from precisely that worldly attitude: "It's fruitless: why should it be taking up the ground?" This parable is unusual: the figure who represents God in the story is *not* the owner of the grove, *but his gardener!* He has a flowering,

fruiting tree in his mind, which is me when I am fully alive. He has the means in hand to make it happen. By his positive hope, and his compassion, he creates a space and a period of time for me in which I can be made good. The Galileans who died in some nameless political difficulty, and the people who were buried alive by the collapse of a tower-block, are images of transience. The parable of the fig-tree is a further resolution to tell us to take our time of grace seriously. Yes, life is short: don't count on next year as your time to make life good, to make it what it should be. *The time is now.*

### The Third Sunday of Lent

Is time speeding by for you? Let this fact give you a sense of urgency. "Your salvation is nearer now than it was when you first believed." Of the forty days of Lent, twenty-three are already past. The Lenten days of grace are slipping by at tremendous speed: and what are the signs of the times in us? How goes the praying, the fasting, the growth in generosity? Do they show signs of health, even as the trees begin to open their leaves for the spring? *Let the fig-tree be a sign to you*, said Jesus, instilling urgency into his listeners. How providentially God uses his world as a kind of clock, to remind us of the covenant! Let us read the signs; let us welcome his healing hand. *Fr Philip*