

Luke 12:54-13:8

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[0 : 00] The story goes of a primary school teacher who was teaching a group of five year olds to understand the difference between the past, the present and the future.

! So on a Monday morning she got the class together and she told them to write down on a piece of paper, today is Monday, yesterday was Sunday, tomorrow is Tuesday.

The class did that, no problem. But the problem started was when they did the same exercise on the following day, on the Tuesday. Class come together and write down on a piece of paper, today is Tuesday, yesterday was Monday.

A hand went up in the class, Miss, you told us that today is Monday. No, no, Monday was yesterday, she said. Today is Tuesday. But you said yesterday was Sunday. No, no, today is Tuesday, tomorrow is Wednesday.

But Miss, how can today be Tuesday? See, the children had not grasped, had they, the concept of time. And how eventually today is tomorrow, isn't it?

[1 : 12] And how today becomes, sorry, today becomes yesterday and tomorrow becomes today. Okay. Jesus, Jesus in this parable teaches us that we need to learn to be better at doing that.

To learn how time works and to learn what today means. In God's timing, you see, our today will soon become yesterday and tomorrow will come.

And we're going to look at this parable in Luke 13 about a fig tree. We've been doing some parables on a Thursday at the lunchtime talks. And this parable comes in a larger section that Luke compiles. A collection of Jesus' teaching. And it seems, I don't know if you felt, it seems a bit cobbled together, doesn't it? But actually there's a united theme here in this part of Luke. The theme is whether you know what day it is today.

The conversation earlier from verse 54 about the signs of the weather. Verse 56. Don't you know how to interpret the present time? Don't you know what day it is today?

[2 : 25] Out of court settlements before the time when you meet the judge. Don't you know what you need to do today before you get to that point? The mention in chapter 13 verse 1, Luke tells us that these people were there at the present time, today.

In Luke's mind, today is what matters here. Don't you know what day it is today and what you must do with today? The parable of the fig tree that gets one more year, doesn't it, to bear fruit, is all about the present time.

Being borrowed time. It's all about knowing what kind of day today is. Of how to proportion your life and to prioritise things in your life. And I think we see Jesus teaching here two things about the present day.

Our present day, the day that we're in, the present time, shouts to us of two things that we've got to hold in tension. Today shouts to us and says we're out of time.

And today shouts to us and says that there's still time. We're out of time and there's still time. To prioritise and prepare for tomorrow. And there's a tension between the two.

[3 : 44] I want to look at those two things. Today tells us we're out of time, first of all. Today tells us we're out of time. Now Jesus speaks to a particular group of people here, doesn't he, who are in a particular generation at a particular time, who are in a crucial place in history.

They are on the earth as Jesus exercises his earthly ministry. And Luke emphasises that they are people who are with Jesus, verse 1 of chapter 13, at that very present time.

Luke tells us that because of the significance of the moment that they find themselves in. That there today is a day of extraordinary significance.

Because they wake up one morning, don't they, on this day, and they don't realise it, but today is the day that Jesus is going to visit their town. And here he is, today of all days.

And that for them means that they are out of time. Today marks a crisis for them. Look with me at the first half of the parable from verse 6.

[4 : 59] Jesus tells this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and it found none.

And he gives the order, doesn't he, in verse 7, and they are really serious words, cut it down. Now. He's not a ruthless vineyard owner.

He's a good vineyard owner. He's waited three years, but he's had no fruit from this fig tree. So now is the time. Cut it down. The day has come, hasn't it, when the fig tree is out of time.

And that is a picture of the day that has come for Jesus' listeners here. That is today for them. And if they don't turn to God, God has already said earlier, yesterday, that he would come and do this, that he would come and clear out the vineyard, and break it down, and remove it.

And he's done that back in the beginning of Luke's Gospel. Just before the arrival of Jesus, we get John the Baptist, don't we? Back in Luke 3, John the Baptist is the last of the Old Testament prophets, and he gets the people ready for their tomorrow.

[6 : 20] When God is going to come, and he is going to do this, he is going to come, and he is going to clear out his vineyard. He uses the same picture of trees and fruit.

In chapter 3, verse 8 and 9, he says to them, bear fruit in keeping with repentance, of turning back to God now. Verse 9, even now the axe is laying to the fruit of the tree, and every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

And his message yesterday was people, tomorrow God is going to come. And he's going to cut you away unless you turn back to him.

And so now in Luke 13, tomorrow has come, hasn't it? And for these people, God has arrived. Jesus has entered in, and time has run out.

And the problem for these people is that they can't see that. Today is crisis point. And the vineyard owner has come to say, cut it down.

[7 : 30] The axe was laid at the root, and now he's saying, take a swing at it. And they didn't know that their case was very, very bad on this day. That judgment was imminent upon these people, upon this generation.

And in the context of this parable, Jesus is trying to explain that to them, of how significant today is for them. And he's saying all the signs point to this crisis.

Back to when he's talking about the weather. He says you can tell what's coming, can't you, when you look at the weather. But you can't see what's really significant about today.

That there is a moral and spiritual storm brewing today. And you know, when you're going to court tomorrow to meet the judge, that today is really important for settling with him before you get to court.

But what had happened was that time had sneaked up on them, hadn't it? And tomorrow had suddenly become today. And God had arrived.

[8 : 37] Time does that, doesn't it? Tomorrow has a funny way of sneaking up on us. You know, when you listen to the radio, and if you're sad like me, you listen to radio too.

And you hear a song, isn't it? And you remember it really well. And the DJ says that that was Michael Jackson from 1983. And you're thinking, no way. That only seems like yesterday, Billie Jean.

Where has the time gone? Older people say to the young, don't they? Enjoy your youth because it's going to go in the blink of an eye. Enjoy your kids while they're young because they grow up so fast. And I've got to tell you, it doesn't feel fast at the time, does it? It feels laboriously slow. But then, bang! And you look back and time flies.

Time sneaks up on you. Life sneaks up on you. Death sneaks up on you. And the day of Jesus has arrived for this generation in Luke and time has run out.

[9 : 45] And their intentions with John the Baptist and their plans and their resolutions and their, I'll do it tomorrow's to sort out their lives with God and to get right with him have expired now.

And I'll do it tomorrow won't work because Jesus is here now and tomorrow has come. And today, God has arrived. There's this funny little section in the middle, isn't there, of our passage today in chapter 13, verse 1 to 5.

And it just seemed out of place on these people coming to Jesus and asking Jesus about Pilate killing these Galileans whose blood he's mixed with sacrifices.

It's really bizarre. and the tower falling on people's heads. And the reason why Luke puts that here is just because Jesus is saying to people around him, these are disastrous things that are going on in the world today and they are telling you that there is no time left.

Atrocities of unjust governments, natural disasters, accidents, towers falling on people's heads, people on killing them, tell you that today is closing time for the world.

[11 : 00] That this world is at a crisis point. And morality and history testify that time is winding up. So Sunday, 13th of October, 2019, things going on in the world today.

We look around us, don't we? There is something terribly wrong in the world today and it's not Brexit. It really isn't. Get that out of your heads. It's not climate change.

It really isn't that. Things in the world tell us that there is something awfully wrong with the world and it's a crisis. That the vineyard that God has made is not a good place that God wanted it to be and that he had designed it to be and it's got to be cleared.

And the signs of the times tell us that time has run out. Louis Armstrong says, we've all the time in the world and that is exactly why we should be worried.

Because when we look properly at the world, time has run out, hasn't it? And they were called to repent and turn back to God but that was yesterday. You might think this morning, why are you telling me this?

[12 : 15] I suppose you could say, isn't it, that this is hardly fair because I've got no beef with God. We're okay. I'm not an atheist. I'm not a mass murderer.

I'm not a thorny person and if God were to come and visit me today, that would be fine. That is fine. I'm not prickly towards God. But I want to ask you, do you need to be actively hostile to God to rebel against him?

To disdain the gardener? Do you need to be actively against him, consciously against him to warrant him cutting you off altogether?

Just imagine your boss comes to you this week and he asks you to do something. Can you get hold of such and such or fill out that form online or whatever? Or your mum and dad, kids, comes into the room and you're watching TV and they come into the room and they say, can you get ready for dinner?

Or can you do your homework, please? And all you do is just ignore them, isn't it? You just carry on on your computer screen at work and you just blank out your boss.

[13 : 29] And you just keep staring at the TV and you just ignore your mum and dad stood in the room. What is that? It is passive rebellion, isn't it? It's passive aggression.

You don't have to shout at your boss and you don't have to throw toys at your mum and dad to rebel at them. You can do it really quietly. You can do it passively.

You can even do it really politely. But it would anger us, wouldn't it? If our employee, if we were the boss, just ignored us or our child just ignored us when we gave them instructions, if we had authority over them to just be ignored, sorry my mum, I'm watching TV, we would feel angry.

And God has every right to feel angry with that, hasn't he, when we treat him in the same way. You don't have to join a militant atheist group or persecute the Christian church.

Actually, I reckon the vast majority of people rebel against God quietly, as nice people, as good people.

[14 : 39] And all you've got to do to deserve God's rightful response of anger is to just stay there, isn't it? And to just do what you're doing and don't change a thing.

Just stare at the telly to rebel and disdain God, the great gardener, and to ignore him. And so we, like them, we can have little sense of the impending crisis of today.

It's so obvious that the case is stacked against this world. The Westminster Directory tells me that my job this morning is to admonish you in times of health, in order to prepare you in times of sickness and in death.

It's quite morbid, isn't it? It would be much easier this morning to spend our time just numbing ourselves, just numbing ourselves to the truth that time has run out.

And that today is a day when Jesus comes to you in his gospel and the world crumbles and our lives crumble under the weight of tomorrow and of his judgment.

[15 : 59] And what God is asking for is that we understand that today. the preacher Matthew Henry said that many good purposes, resolutions and intentions lie in the churchyard.

Because life sneaks up on you, doesn't it? And God doesn't owe us all the time in the world. He doesn't owe us our 70 or 80 years of life.

He doesn't even owe us tomorrow. Before he should come and meet us and respond rightly to quiet rebellion. So today tells us we're out of time but there's another thing that we need to hold in tension.

Time is out but today tells us there is still time. Today tells us there is still time but not much. Not much.

If you've got the sense of the New Testament you might have heard parables like this before where Jesus is talking about fig trees and vines. He talks about it a lot doesn't he? There's the occasions in Matthew and Mark where Jesus curses a fig tree and it withers and dies.

[17:09] And John the Baptist uses this sort of language we've seen. He talks about the signs of the fig tree later on in Luke chapter 21. So this is a picture isn't he that he uses a lot, that the gospel writers use, that is a classic picture from the Old Testament of the vine and the fig tree and it pictures the relationship between God and his people.

Remember Isaiah says the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. And God in his tender loving care means his people to be something like Kew Gardens, isn't it?

Fruitful and beautiful and delightful. people. But as the history of the Bible shows the people harden and rebel against their loving gardener and they end up more like my backyard full of thorns and briars and they get prickly with God.

And so God is going to come and stop that and he's going to cut down this fig tree and that terrible reality is in the background of the New Testament imagery on the vineyard. But this parable here brings something unique to that picture.

to all the other mentions of vineyards and fig trees. This parable speaks of the ends, doesn't it? Of cutting the fig tree down but there is more.

[18:39] Just look at verse 8 and 9. And he answered them, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig round it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, then you can cut it down. Today marks a crisis, but Jesus says in this parable, for today, that crisis has been averted.

John the Baptist said, didn't he, judgment is here. Jesus says now, there's still time, but not much. In the story, the fig tree is spared for another year, isn't it? There are all kinds of opinions on why three years, why an extra year, about Jesus' ministry being three years long, I don't know, there could be truth in that, but I think just quite basically it shows, doesn't it, that three years is long enough to see that this fig tree is in trouble, that it hasn't produced fruit, and it needs another season, it needs another year.

This is last chance saloon, isn't it? This is one more go for the fig tree.

[19:58] And so Jesus is saying, today is a crisis, but there is another day, there's still time, but not much. And so we learn that Jesus' ministry operates on the edge between judgment and mercy.

because the crisis day has come, but it's also been pushed back, it's been delayed. And perhaps the vine owner thinks, doesn't he, just perhaps this destruction is not necessary.

The story has the same bite to it, God comes and finds no fruit. He comes to a world that is rebelling against him and he should end it right now, today. And he's not sentimental about that.

I was chatting with someone at the Lunchtime Thoughts on Thursday, and he was saying that he's just ordered a plum tree in his garden. And I said, that is delightful, isn't it?

A plum tree in London, that is just lovely. And I was really bigging up this plum tree. What a lovely thought, this plum tree. I chopped it down, he said. I've had it for two years and it hasn't given me anything.

[21:09] Oh, that's a shame. this is one of the loveliest gentlemen you'd ever meet, and he's got this plum tree, but he's just chopped it down. He's not sentimental about these fruit trees that he's got.

And God is not sentimental about people who do wrong and who rebel and live in his world as if he isn't there. But this is the unique thing about the parable.

He isn't sentimental, but he is kind. And in his wrath, he remembers mercy. And today is the day, but there is still time, but not much.

There is still time, but it's borrowed time, isn't it, for the fig tree in the parable. And some of Jesus' audience in his day there, literally may only have one day with Jesus' presence there before he

moves on.

He's travelling in this part of Luke from the north of Israel down to Jerusalem, and they've got this one chance, haven't they? And Jesus extends this opportunity with them, and they don't know when that chance will be over, and they've got to grab it now.

[22 : 25] And good intentions and resolutions, and I'll do it tomorrow, are not what he seeks from them, and not what he seeks from you now, because they and we are on borrowed time.

And he seeks repentance, fruit of repentance, of saying to God, I have not lived life in this world as I should have done, and I've quietly rebelled against you, and I'm going to turn around from that, and I'm going to live for you.

And the Lord Jesus, he wants to help you with that. It's not, is it just a cold deadline extension, it's not just extending the time, but leaving you to get on with it, and sort yourself out.

Notice the suggestion of the vine dresser to rework the ground. He says, no, give it another year, and I'll dig around it, and I'll put manure on the ground.

Now that is bizarre, because fig trees were not known to be high maintenance trees. You didn't need to do much for them, you just plant them and let them do their thing. And so the vine dresser is suggesting, isn't he, an unusual amount of help and care for this fig tree.

[23 : 41] He's going to pull out all the stops to get this fruitful tree fruitful again. And he's going to spend time with them to nurture them and to try and give them faith.

And that is what Jesus does in the next chapters. He heals in synagogues and he goes through towns and villages in Israel. And he teaches and he journeys and he heals and he preaches and he warns.

Today is a day when time is up but there is still time to be changed by him and to come to him. And he wants to help you with that today.

You don't have to do that on your own. If you'll come to him and you'll admit how you've lived your life, he will come to you and he will give you what you need to be fruitful.

He'll provide the manure that you need, the nutrition. There's still time but not much. And for now the mistake is thinking that since tomorrow hasn't come that somehow we are special, that we're different, that we're not going to meet God like these people have met God, that we're not like the bad people in the world.

[25 : 03] And that is what they think, isn't it? And this whole question of what happened to those people that the tower fell on and who were killed by Pilate, the question they ask, isn't it, was it their fault?

But Jesus turns that around. Because the question they should be asking is why haven't we perished for Jesus? And if you live life ignoring God, the answer is that every day that passes away in your life isn't the sign that you're better than anyone else, or you deserve more time than anyone else, but that in God's mercy each day is another crisis averted.

And don't mistake the postponing of God's response to our wrongdoing as a cancellation of that response. It is delayed, isn't it, it is set back, not discontinued, not cancelled.

It's what Peter says, that the Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but should reach repentance.

See, when today becomes yesterday and tomorrow does come, it shows that there is still time, but there isn't much. And not because it will never happen, but because God is patient.

[26 : 33] Where Jesus seeks to rework you and replant you and make you fruitful and pleasing to God when he does come. So this is about preparing, isn't it, now while you can, of being admonished now, and it's not pleasant, is it, it's not a nice thing to think about, to get ready now in times of health or when there is still breath in you.

I was reading a book by this author called Jen Wilkin, many of you know her, she's a good writer, and she shares about her struggles that she had with skin cancer.

She was unexpectedly diagnosed in her 30s, and she went through treatment, and thankfully that went well, and she's in remission, but she talks about the scars of her surgery.

She says, some people have tattoos with a mantra for their lives engraved on their bodies, but I have something better. Perhaps you can relate, she says. Unlike those who ink their credos into their flesh, I won't get a tattoo, not because I disapprove of them, but because I'm already sufficiently marked.

I have a satin slick scar, which if you were to see it traces no apparent pattern, but to my eyes, more legible than any tattoo, it forms the words tomorrow if the Lord wills.

[28 : 02] She says, we view time differently if we see tomorrow as a place where we go, only if the Lord wills. When and if Monday tomorrow comes, it is because the Lord wills, isn't it?

And if you are not a Christian believer this morning, we're really glad you're here. Tomorrow, you can start by praying a prayer, can't you?

Lord God, thank you for another disaster averted for another day. Thank you for grace and mercy tomorrow if the Lord wills.

Because time really does creep up on you, doesn't it? God, and you can't ignore this God forever. And so today he is not asking you to be a better person.

He's not asking you to pull your socks up and make a better effort to be nicer. That's not the kind of fruit that he wants. John the Baptist has already said, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

[29 : 09] That's the sort of fruit that he's looking for. Of saying to God, I have not lived my life as I should have done in your world. And I'm going to turn around and I'm going to live for you now.

And in doing that, let Jesus be the Lord and Saviour that you need. And let him help you to do that. Let him provide what you need to please him.

Join with me in doing that today. Because when you've got all the time in the world to do that, that's how little time you've got. There is time, but not much.

Let's pray.