

A fair amount of foliage in today's scriptures!

First we have a bush that's on fire but never gets consumed by the flames
then we have a fig tree that has no figs.

Strange and curious images but if we don't understand them,
we won't understand the meaning of these scriptures.

In the time of Jesus, raising a fig tree took some time.

After planting the tree, you'd have to let it grow for about three years
before it bore any fruit.

And once it did, you couldn't eat the figs for another three years
because of a strange prohibition in the Book of Leviticus.

In the seventh year, the figs on the tree were to be brought to the temple
and offered to the Lord as a gesture of thanksgiving.

The orchard owner in the gospel story
has been looking for figs to harvest for three years
- so that means it's been eight or nine years
since the tree was planted.

You can see, then, why the owner has given up on this tree!

But the gardener is patient yet, asking for yet one more year
to nurture the fig tree to harvest.

I wonder... has anyone been as patient with you... with me...
as the gardener was with this fig tree?

I wonder... have you or I had occasion in our lives
to be as patient with another person
(a child, a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a friend...)
as the gardener was with the fig tree?

If someone has been this patient with you or me,
then you and I know what it is to be truly loved...

And if you or I have been this patient with another,
then we know what it is to truly love someone...

Patience in the face of carelessness, forgetfulness and hurt;
patience in the face of rejection and infidelity;
patience in the face of fruitlessness:

such patience is a prime quality of love.

It's the patience parents often naturally have with their children...

It's the patience promised in wedding vows
often pronounced by those too young to understand
what they are promising...

It's the patience that keeps good friends true friends...

It's the patience the Lord has with each of us
when we ignore, squander and take for granted
the love he patiently suffered for us on the Cross...

Like the folks in the gospel story,
we are often tempted to wonder about the sins and guilt of others.
But as someone has pointed out:
when I point the finger at someone else,
three of my fingers remain pointed at me...
Jesus says the same thing here.
“Don’t gossip over the guilt of others.
If you don’t repent yourselves, you’ll end up in the same way.”

But Jesus is the patient gardener of the fig tree
and he patiently cultivates his grace in my life and yours,
and he’s doing that even –and especially–
when we are bearing no fruit.

How long will he be patient with us?

Look at the burning bush!

The Lord’s loving heart burns for us always,
ever warming us with his light and mercy and pardon,
and all with a love that is never exhausted, never consumed:
a flame that never dies...

Lent is a season for us to remember how we have failed
to patiently love one another
and Lent is a season to remember how patiently
the Lord has loved us,
and how patiently he gardens the orchards of our lives,
ever hopeful for the harvest he calls us to yield.

Week after week, Lent after Lent, year after year,
in spite of our failings, forgetfulness and fruitlessness,
the Lord sets this table for us
where he patiently cultivates his love in us
through the gift of his altar, his body and blood.

May this be the day, the Lent, the year
of the Lord’s harvest in our lives.

Rev. Austin Fleming