

Third Sunday of Lent,
Sunday, 20th March 2022



Dear Friends,

'For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.' (Luke 13: 7)

As the Russian war against Ukraine continues to rage around its innocent and terrified people, so the love of the world rises around them in prayer and action: pouring money, food, clothes and medical supplies into the darkness of their distress. As Christians, it is our responsibility to work for good: in supporting charities and organisations who are managing to get help to people; by giving our time to help their work; by welcoming refugees into our homes, and by donating monies to the DEC Appeal at <https://www.dec.org.uk/appeal/ukraine-humanitarian-appeal>

As ever, the Gospels are ahead of us in pointing the way to the truth, the way and the life we must aspire to living in Jesus' name. Luke's account of two enigmatic encounters Jesus had with groups of people, show us how Jesus responds to our rather selfish human attitudes to others in distress and our sense of entitlement and expectation as we rationalise the suffering of others to feel better about ourselves.

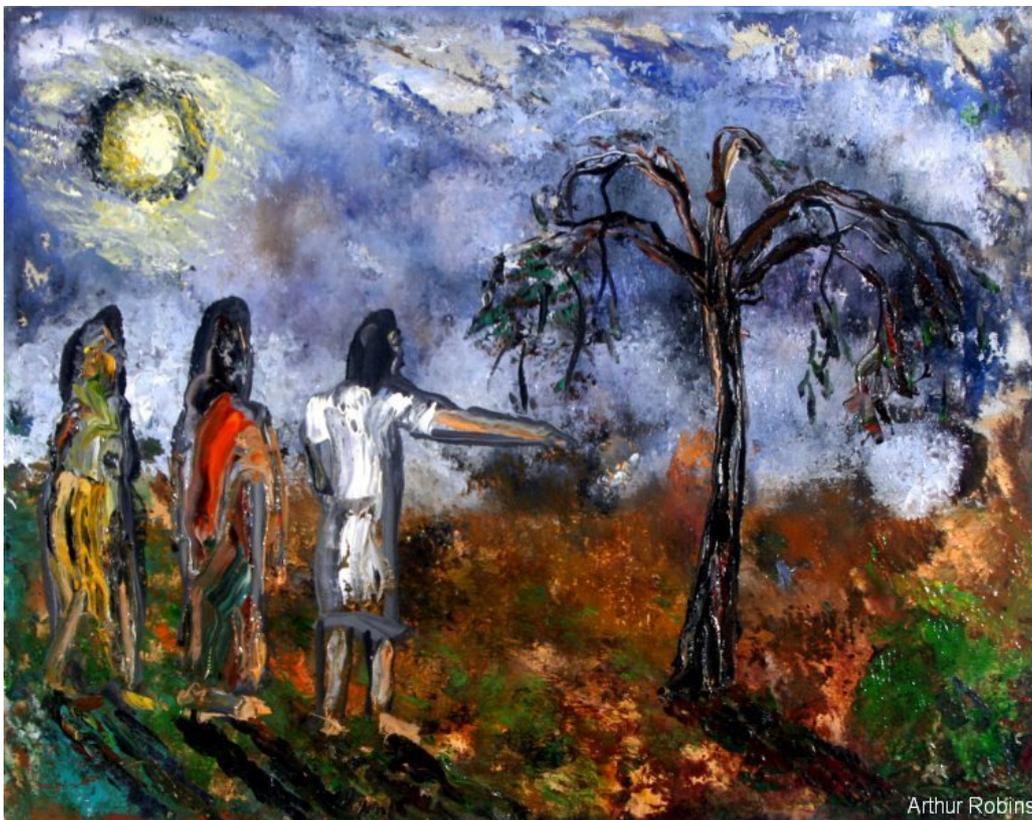


'Jesus Cursing the Fig Tree' by Dr Ganesh Kelagina Beedu Shenoy

Jesus tells us we can't justify others' suffering by judging them to be deserving of their afflictions or by telling ourselves they have somehow brought calamity upon themselves and washing our hands of their predicament. All we are doing in these situations is falsely absolving ourselves of the need to love the other, by showing compassion for our brothers and sisters wherever and whoever they might be. Jesus tells us their plight is our problem – we cannot pass by on the other side. We must love them as ourselves.

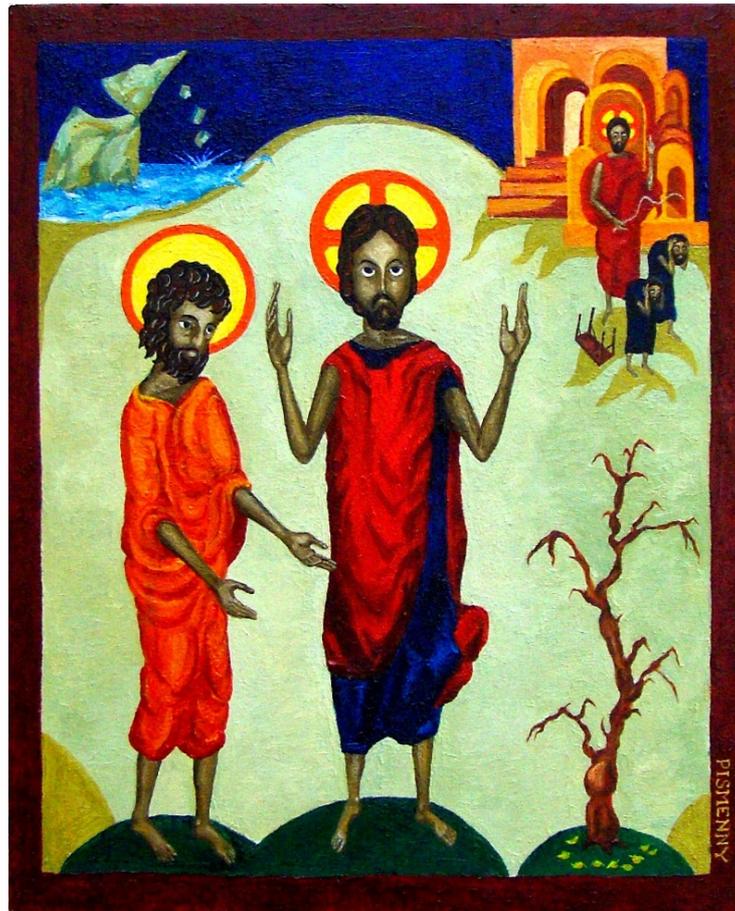
Luke's text also gives us an insight as to the way we will be dealt with if we fail to love the other by using the imagery of a failing fig tree. *'For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.'* The gardener in the parable is Jesus. He is telling us that to flourish, we must root ourselves in the rich soil of His love. By giving the beleaguered fig tree a second chance, by feeding it with manure rich in organic matter and humus and by nurturing it with tender loving care, there is every chance the fig tree will recover and go on to bear delicious and life-giving fruit.

In the Old Testament, there are numerous references to fruit trees as examples of Godly and fruitful living. Are we not like this fig tree? If we live for ourselves outside of the loving grace of Christ, we will stumble and fail. Our lives will diminish and dwindle under the limiting impact of our sinfulness. Our ultimate end will be to wither and die. Yet if we turn our lives around, if we submit to Christ and repent of our foolishness, we will find a new way of living which will help us to flourish and grow in the joy and light of Jesus' transformational love – both as individuals, and together, as love impacts impact our world for good.



'The Parable of the Fig Tree' by Arthur Robins

Just as the deaths of the eighteen, crushed by the falling tower at Siloam which was badly constructed by people who failed to think of the consequences of their use of cheap building materials, so the war against Ukraine is a devastating example of one man's selfish use of power against others. However we act in support of the oppressed and weak, so we are united as a force for good in the world. Jesus tells us that love will overcome evil. Our decisions, as we journey through Lent, to look deeply into our actions and behaviours – all the things we do or don't do, and the reasons we give for these sins of commission and omission, are important steps in helping us to think differently and to focus our lives aright in the pursuit of compassion and love.



'The Withering of the Fig Tree' by Alexey Pismenny

As a worshipping community throughout Lent, we have already enjoyed some wonderful services and Lent talks: opportunities to reflect on all that we have been and to focus on how we could flourish in faith. Café Church began a fascinating two-part study on the important work of the charity, Karis Kids, in the slums of Uganda. If you missed the first service, then do come along to the second part on Sunday, 3rd April at 4pm - and book a seat for the screening of the film *'Queen of Katwe'* which will take place at Sparsholt Memorial Hall on 2nd April at 6.30pm. The Bexley Phoenix Choir will be performing on that same night in St Mary's Church, Chilbolton at 7pm.

This Sunday evening, St Catherine's will also be welcoming the return of 'Peace and Wholeness', a contemplative service offering an opportunity for quiet reflection and prayers for healing. Do join us at 6pm.

Our Lent series of talks has looked at the lives and works of Cicely Saunders, founder of the Hospice movement, and John Wesley who was instrumental in the birth of Methodism. We have three more weeks to look forward to – this coming Tuesday, 22nd March @ 7pm, St Catherine’s Church, Littleton will be hosting an evening on Lutheran Priest, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned for attempting to kill Hitler. There will be a talk on the Missionary, Gladys Aylward, at Wherwell Church on 31st March and on Friday, 8th April, St Mary’s Chilbolton will host the last talk in the series on Wilson Carlile, founder of the Church Army.

Please also join us for 10am Sunday services in each of our parishes to mark Mothering Sunday next weekend. Details are on the service schedule below.

Yours, in the rich soil of Christ’s love,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

Collect Prayer for the Third Sunday of Lent

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.



Luke 13: 1-9 - Repent or Perish

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ The gardener replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’

Benefice Lent Reflections

This year, we are hosting a series of Lent talks around our parish churches reflecting on the life and works of remarkable Christian activists. Please see the schedule of talks below. Do make a point of coming along as part of your Lenten meditations.

Dr Cicely Saunders (1918-2005) – Founder of the Hospice Movement. (Crawley – Monday 7th March)

John Wesley (1703-1791) - Leader of a revival movement within the Church of England which gave birth to the Methodist Church. (Sparsholt – Wednesday 16th March)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) - German pastor who wrote ‘The Cost of Discipleship’ and was interned by the Nazis for his resistance to Adolf Hitler. (Littleton – Tuesday 22nd March)

Gladys Aylward (1902-1970) - Missionary to China depicted in the film ‘The Inn of the Sixth Happiness’ starring Ingrid Bergman. (Wherwell – Thursday 31st March)

Wilson Carlile (1847-1942) – Founder of The Church Army – (Chilbolton – Friday 8th April)

These talks will be held in the Churches and start at 7pm

Date	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
22nd March		Littleton			
31st March				Wherwell	
8th April					Chilbolton
Holy Week				Maundy Thursday	Good Friday

Schedule of Services

Now that all national Coronavirus restrictions have been lifted, it is no longer necessary to book seats in our parishes for services. Neither is it mandatory for you to wear masks in church. However, Coronavirus is still very much with us. There are a number of people in our villages with it at present, so we are encouraging people to observe social distancing measures.

As our services begin to open up again, we have a wide range of sacramental and lay-led services on offer. Of particular note, Peace and Wholeness begins again on 20th March at St Catherine’s, Littleton. St Mary’s, Crawley and St Stephen’s Sparsholt are enjoying new lay-led Morning Worship services on 3rd and 4th Sundays respectively.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Ch</i>	<i>Cr</i>	<i>Li</i>	<i>Sp</i>	<i>Wh</i>
<i>20th March</i>	Holy Communion	Morning Worship		8am – BCP Holy Communion	
<i>23rd March</i> WEDNESDAY			Holy Communion		
<i>27th March</i>	Mothering Sunday Family Service	Mothering Sunday Family Service	Mothering Sunday Family Service	Mothering Sunday Family Service	Mothering Sunday Family Service
<i>3rd April</i>	Morning Prayer	Holy Communion	4pm – Café Church with Karis Kids		
<i>10th April</i> <i>Palm Sunday</i>	<i>With Wh</i>		Holy Communion with a Donkey Procession	Palm Sunday Service with a Donkey Procession	Palm Sunday Service
<i>14th April</i> <i>Maundy Thursday</i>				6pm - Holy Communion with Washing of the Feet	
<i>15th April</i> <i>Good Friday</i>	<i>With Wh</i>	10am - Easter Garden	12 noon - Good Friday Meditation		3pm - Good Friday Meditation
<i>17th April</i> EASTER SUNDAY	Easter Holy Communion	Easter Service	Easter Holy Communion	Easter Holy Communion	Easter Service
<i>24th April</i>			Morning Prayer	Morning Worship	8am – BCP Holy Communion
<i>27th April</i> WEDNESDAY			Holy Communion		