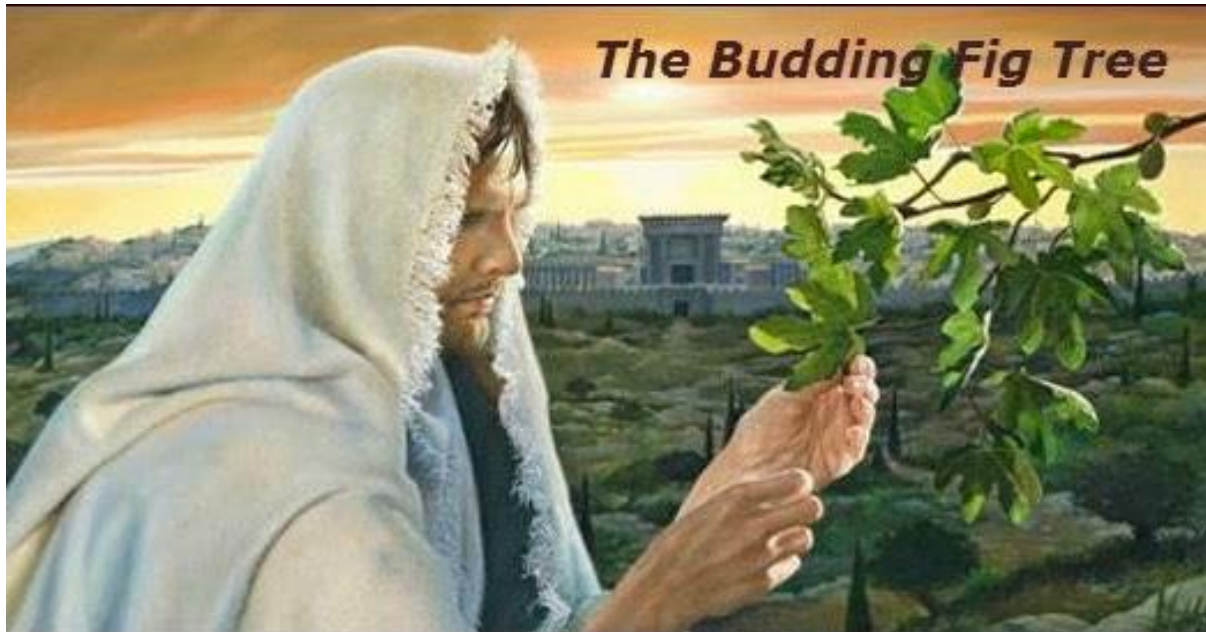


15. Encouragement for the Journey



Sermon

Wednesday, 16th September 2020 – Glenda Bolitho



The Parable of the Fig Tree

Bible Reading: Matthew 24:32-35

Before I commence, let me pray,

*“May the words of my mouth and the
Meditation of my heart,
Be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”*

Amen

Introduction

Our parable today is a very short one. It is the Parable of the Fig Tree. This parable is found in almost identical form in the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. Our reading today was taken from Matthew’s gospel.

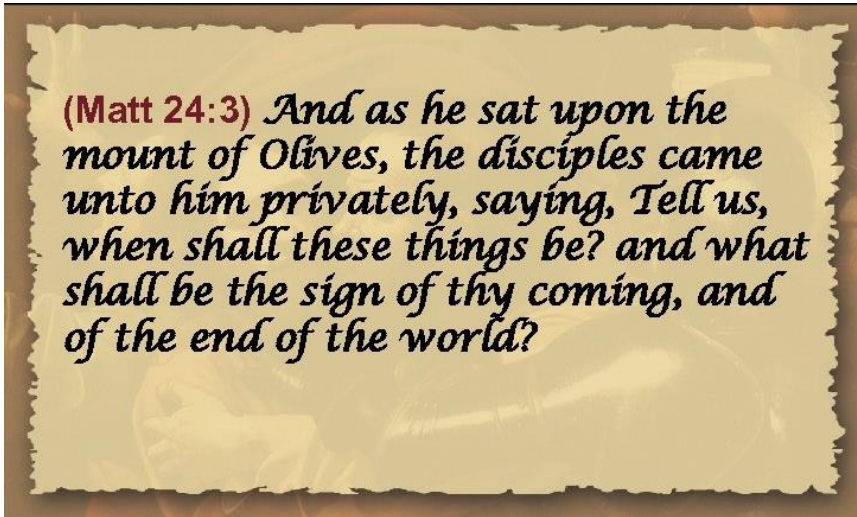
Setting

It may be helpful to look back on this chapter and look at the events leading up to Jesus' telling of this parable. Let me share with you this quote from the study notes in the Life Application Study Bible.

“Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the very place where the prophet Zachariah had predicted that the Messiah would stand when he came to establish His kingdom (Zechariah 14:4). This was a fitting place for the disciples to ask Jesus when He would come in power and what they should expect then. Jesus' reply emphasized the events that would take place before the end of the world. He pointed out that His disciples should be less concerned with knowing the date and more concerned with being prepared – living God's way consistently so that no matter when Jesus returned they would be ready.”

The Olivet Discourse

The parable is part of the fifth and last of the great discourses or collections of Jesus' teachings. This discourse is often referred to as The Olivet Discourse. Central to this passage is the theme of judgment – judgment on Jerusalem and the coming destruction of the temple and judgment associated with the Parousia or (final coming of the Son of Man). Jesus public ministry is now over and his instruction is for his disciples only. The parable of the fig tree is part of Jesus' answer to his disciples to their question on when the second coming will occur and what will be the sign of his coming and of the end of the age.



(Matt 24:3) *And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?*

The gospels reveal that Jesus was an astute observer of nature. His teaching touches on the environment that surrounded him and his listeners, and the parables are no exception to this as in many instances they touch the life of the shepherd, the farmer and the fisherman. Jesus' audience lived closer to nature than most of us do now and so they had little difficulty in understanding the meaning of his message.

Each Man Lived in Safety Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree

The fig tree was a common fruit tree throughout Israel, in Biblical times, especially near Jerusalem where Bethphage was located. Bethphage means "house of figs"; and in Israel at that time, the saying that made reference to the peaceful reign of Solomon which was "*each man lived in safety under his own vine and fig tree*" was well known (1 Kings 4:25, Micah 4:4).

During the summer, the fig tree with its large green leaves, provides ample and refreshing shade. But unlike trees such as the olive, the cedar and the palm, the fig tree loses its leaves as winter approaches. While the other deciduous trees begin to show signs of life early in Spring, the blossoming almond tree, for example, the fig tree thrusts its bare branches heavenward until much later in Spring when the weather is warmer. But then the sap begins to flow, the buds swell, and within a few days the tender leaves appear. Nature proclaims the message that summer time has come.



An Uncomplicated Analogy

And so, Jesus taught his disciples, *“As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.”* This was language his audience understood. The question was whether the people would be able to interpret the sign theologically and spiritually. Would his disciples know how to read the sign of the budding fig tree? *“Even so, when you see all these things you know that it is near, right at the door”* (Mt 24:34).

The point of the illustration is rather obvious: when the trees begin to show the tender leaves, you know that summer is approaching. What then is the comparison? The evangelists differ in their wording of the point of comparison. Matthew is all-inclusive. He writes, *“Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door”*. But Luke has a different ending: *“you know that the kingdom of God is near.”* He omits the phrase *“right at the door.”*

An Unmistakable Application

Jesus applies this truth directly to his contemporaries. *“I tell you the truth,”* he tells his disciples, *“this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”* Certainly, the disciples will be able to ascertain the desecration and destruction of the temple much the same as they determine the arrival of summer by looking at the fig tree. Yet the text reads, *“this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.”* All these things predicted in the discourse in this chapter go far beyond the time of Jesus’ contemporaries.

The Qumran Scrolls

However, the Qumran scrolls have shed significant light on the meaning of the term “**this generation.**” The expression indicates that its duration is not limited to one lifespan and should not be taken literally. It refers to people who persist, and are faithful to the end. It includes, therefore, the disciples who heard the words from Jesus’ lips, the people who witnessed the fall of Jerusalem, and it also includes the believers throughout the following or ensuing centuries who have steadfastly looked forward to the fulfilment of the prophecies relating to the end of the age, including us.

The Kingdom of God is Near

The image of the budding fig tree is usually associated with a period of blessing (Joel 2:22) and hardly with destruction and calamity. Our parable, then, should **not** be seen primarily in relation to calamities predicted in the discourse. Rather, the emphasis should remain on the redemption evident in the coming Kingdom of God. Luke, in his gospel, presents the words of Jesus in a frame of joyful expectation. He says, “*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because redemption is drawing near.*” He uses nearly identical language in the application of the budding fig tree: “*Even so, when you see all these things happening, you know that the Kingdom of God is near*” (Luke 21:31.) Of course, the terms “**redemption**” and “**kingdom of God**”, in the context refer to the future consummation of salvation. They allude to the ultimate coming of the Kingdom of God in which the people of God will be released from affliction.

An Unchanging Authority

The parable concludes with the words, “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*” The words of Jesus do not lose their impact when a particular prediction has been fulfilled in time. Rather, Jesus words are as valid to-day as they were when they were first spoken. Jesus’ words, like God’s, can be totally

trusted. As we read in Isaiah 40:8, *“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God lasts for ever.”*

The Message of the Parable

What then is the message of the parable of the fig tree?.....Until the day of Christ’s return, when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, no generation is exempt from calamities. But Christians ought not to be dismayed or disheartened. They ought to observe the signs of the times very carefully, much the same as they look at the budding fig tree, and know that the events around them are ushering in a new age. The parable therefore, urges believers to persevere in watchfulness. The adversities they encounter ought not to diminish their endurance and undermine their confidence. Rather, adversities ought to confirm expectations of the glorious finale of which these adversities are harbingers or forerunners. And even though believers throughout the ages have suffered afflictions and have coped with disaster, the Christian today, more than ever before is encouraged by the timely words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, *“And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here”* (Rom 13:11,12).

AMEN.

Reference Material:

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Holman C.S.B. Study Bible
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