

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent (C)

28<sup>th</sup> February 2016

'Barren fig-tree or burning bush?'

Ex 3: *I AM WHO AM*      Ps 102: *It is He who forgives all your guilt.*  
1Cor 10: *The man who thinks he is safe must be careful.*  
Lk 13:1–9: *A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard ...*

Do you think that on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent it's maybe time to ask the pertinent question? ... How is Lent going? What I set out to do, at the start of Lent 2½ wks ago — have I managed that? Have I kept to it? More or less? — or not at all? Remember, our Lord set us three tasks at the start of Lent: some fasting ('giving up'); some prayer; and some almsgiving ('giving to charity'). If we are serious about being Catholics, then we must be serious about keeping Lent. This isn't a season that should pass us by. So — let's be honest. How have we kept Lent so far?

There's an image in the Scriptures today that might help us. There are two trees standing symbolically in today's readings: one which grabs the attention; the other which is unremarkable and is only worthy of being chopped down. One which is fully and supernaturally alive, the burning bush at which God appeared to Moses; and the other, half-dead, the fig tree of Jesus's parable

which refuses to bear fruit.

**The burning bush** was the scene of God's new and significant revelation — His holy name, *YHWH = I am who am*. And this encounter led to the complete conversion of Moses's life to the work of God, to the mission of liberating God's people. **The fig tree** of Jesus' parable, instead, represents a person who has been continually unwilling to be converted, resistant to change, despite repeated efforts of the owner (i.e. God) to provoke a change, and stimulate the bearing of good fruit. But the whole point of Jesus's parable is that there *is* time: time to make a change. This is why it's a perfect reading for Lent. There *is* another chance: this holy season of self-denial, prayer and giving. It's another opportunity for us to stop being someone unremarkable and spiritually half-dead, and to start being someone really blossoming with goodness. *This* is the beauty that God looks for in us ... this is the fruit He hopes for year by year ... that we are bright with His graces and blessings, laden with goodness and charity, firm in faith and truth.

God in Himself, of course, is quite remarkable ... as symbolized by the extraordinary sight of a bush on fire with love and yet not being burnt up with passion. We too, really alive in God, are going to be different, and worthy of notice (perhaps even a bit unusual in the eyes of some). Are we willing to be a tree that is noticed, a tree that is remarked upon? Are we willing in Lent to do the spade work, to do the manuring, to really let God get in to the places that matter, to dig deep around our roots and shake ourselves up, so as to be something more beautiful for God: someone alive and shining in Him, flaming out but not burnt up ... We can be this person; in Lent we can let God make us this person, freed from sin, fruitful and fresh, on fire for the Lord.

But we can only let God do this if we co-operate and give Him a chance this Lent. So, let's go back to our initial question: what am I doing this Lent? What *should* I be doing this Lent? Do I want to be the barren fig tree that Jesus keeps coming to visit year after year and finding no change, no new fruit, no new goodness? Or do I want to

be the bush that blazes out with the love of God, attracting to those around me a new and hopeful experience of God's love and tenderness? Which do I want to be? Keeping Lent well this year could be the very thing that makes the difference. Wouldn't that be great? To look back one day on one's spiritual life and say that Lent 2016 was the time when suddenly I took strength in my faith, and God gave me the courage to be truly a faithful and devout believer every day. God can do this, if we ask Him! He is patient enough to await our repentance and can then transform us into something remarkable, a powerhouse of Christian love.