

Lesson From the Fig Tree 1

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[0 : 00] Our God, as we confront your word and your word confronts us this morning, help us to know the reality of your purpose and your presence.

We ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. This is a very special Sunday for me. It's actually the beginning of year 12 at St. John's for me. And thank you very much. It's very embarrassing.

But even more, the delight, which is a fairly exclusive delight in some ways, but I hope all of you could share it in some measure of being the grandfather of William Robin David and having him baptized here this morning.

So that's a very special landmark. What I want you to do today is to look at this part of Matthew 24, which is on page 26 of your Pew Bible in the New Testament section, and verse 32.

[1 : 35] And these words, which were just read for us from the scriptures, they're part of the whole of the chapter.

Jim Packer preached on this chapter last week, and we'll be back at it again next week. But the particular paragraph is verse 32 to 35 on page 26, chapter 24.

Now, the way it's almost a kind of model for you of how Jesus teaches you to know who you are and what time it is and what purpose he has and what God is doing.

In other words, how to be an intelligent, understanding disciple of Jesus Christ. Some of you may not consider yourselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

I hope the service of baptism will stir you to perhaps think you may be wrong not to be. And I hope this word may give you some direction in how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 00] Jesus Christ is, in the first instance, wonderfully accommodating. He starts where we all are. And he says, here's a fig tree.

Now, most of us can handle that. It's not too big a problem. A tree, a deciduous tree, which among the evergreens of the Holy Land would stand out as being without any leaves during the winter season.

And then to the careful observer, the branches turn soft, we're told, and the leaves begin to sprout. And you know that summer is just about here.

Well, nature is the first means by which perhaps one of the primary means by which God teaches us. And the difficulty is that most of us try and stay in the school of nature all our lives and never learn that nature always points beyond itself.

It never points to itself. It always represents something beyond itself. So that when you see the branches turn soft and the leaves begin to sprout, then you know that summer is coming.

[4 : 23] It's sort of like seeing the first snowdrop, you know. You think what a ridiculous plant that is, that it would dare to break into our world in such a cold and unseasonable time of year.

But the snowdrop knows that spring is coming. And the fig tree knows that summer is coming. And so from nature you begin to see that there's something greater that nature points to, that you don't end up just by studying fig trees in obedience to Christ.

Christ uses the fig tree and indeed the whole of nature to point beyond nature. So if you are one of those people who takes great delight in nature, let me tell you something.

The reason you take delight in it is because it always points beyond itself. And I don't think you are a true naturalist until you see and recognize that.

It points beyond itself. Then look at the next verse and see what it does for you. The next verse says, So also when you see all these things, you know that he is near at the very gate.

[5 : 50] And so you wonder then, well, what are all these things? Well, it's almost as though Jesus says, now you've looked at nature and you see what it points, that it points to something beyond

itself.

Now look at the headlines of your daily newspaper. And you will see that they demand explanation. The reason they demand explanation is because they come under the several categories which are described at length in Matthew 24, and which Dr. Packer told us about last week.

There are religious signs which we are to learn to read, that in our time there will be false Christs, there will be false prophets, there will be people saying he is here, he is there, he is the other place, and we are to endure all that.

But there will be signs and wonders performed by false prophets, we're told, and we're to endure that and not be taken in by it.

And he talks then about the political signs that nations will rise against nation and kingdoms against kingdoms, and there will be wars, and there will be rumors of wars, and that will go on and on and on seemingly without end.

[7 : 27] And then there will be physical signs. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light.

Stars will fall from heaven. And those kind of great natural phenomena will take place in the order of nature and still hang in, endure.

And Jesus says you're to learn something from that. He says, So also when you see all these things, know that he is near and at the very gates.

Well, the commentators argue with that translation and say it means it is near, and Luke's gospel says it's the kingdom of God that's near.

But in all those tremendous events, there is an awareness that another reality needs to break in in our world, and we hear in a sense the thump of this reality coming near to us because in all the political catastrophes and the psychological, and the psychological, and the psychological, spiritual catastrophes, and the physical catastrophes, and political, all those things.

[8 : 48] You are to understand them not in themselves, but because their very presence indicates another reality. The kingdom is very near.

It's at the gate. And so you are to persevere as one who knows about the kingdom. Our country was deeply shocked by the tragedy in Montreal this week.

And it's a tragedy, the circumstances of which can be written probably in one short paragraph of any newspaper to tell you exactly what happened. But countless columns of writing have gone on and on and on because we want to understand why this country standing at the pinnacle of democracy, standing in the prosperity of our economy, in the achievements of our technology, all those things.

Why does this happen to us? Why would it happen in our kind of world? In the kind of world that you and I live in every day because that event, you know, could just as easily have happened here in Vancouver as in Montreal.

Why? And we go on and on and ask these questions. Well, I don't know that we can escape asking those questions. And I don't know that we can come to any very satisfactory conclusion.

[10 : 28] I don't even know if, I suppose it would be derogatory to say we could anticipate why it happened and see that it doesn't happen again. I don't know if we can do that because it was totally unexpected.

But somehow, what Jesus is saying is that when you see those things, know that the kingdom is nigh.

That is, that there is another reality and that your job is to be in touch with that other reality. Stephen Hawking is a professor at Cambridge who's, I guess he has Lou Gehrig's disease and he's strapped into a wheelchair, but he's, I suppose he's a brilliant astrophysicist or something like that.

But he's written a book called A Brief History of Time. And in that, he makes one lovely line which I'd like to pass on to you. Not that I fully understand it and I hope you don't either, but it may be, it may be illuminating.

He says, we calculate imaginary time in order to understand real space time according to quantum mechanics.

[11 : 56] Does that grab you? Well, what he says is that we can't understand, according to quantum mechanics, real space time.

It's way beyond us. And so we have an imaginary concept of time and that imaginary concept serves us so that we can understand an ultimate reality which is only known to those who are

proficient in the field of quantum mechanics.

Then I suppose they don't know it all either. But I found that a very helpful statement because it shows that in the area of science, you have exactly the same issue that Jesus is dealing with in the 24th chapter of Matthew.

That there is the imaginary reality of wars and rumors of wars and suns being darkened and stars falling from heaven and nation rising against nation.

All those things are in one sense imaginary things because they speak of a greater reality and that is the triumph of the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

[13:18] And that's what's really happening. But we don't see it any more than we can see real space time. We have what we call, what Stephen Hawking calls, imaginary time in order to give us some ability to comprehend a greater reality which we can't handle very well.

And that's what Jesus is teaching his disciples to do. Beginning with the fig tree, then observing the processes of history. And then look in verse 34 and you'll see where he takes them to from there.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. Well, again, this is a second reference to all these things, all the events of our history.

We have to try and come to terms with them. Now, interestingly enough, and Dr. Packer referred to this last week, he said, one of the signs will be that this gospel will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations.

Now, the peculiar thing about that particular sign is that we can take part in it, the preaching of the gospel to all the nations.

[14:54] And Dr. Packer rebuked us fairly thoroughly for not being more involved in the business of preaching throughout the whole world of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that salvation and power and authority belong to our God and to his Christ.

The whole world needs to hear that. Now, we had a distinguished member of this congregation who left this congregation about a year ago because he said we weren't doing it and that that was the mandate that belonged to the church and that was what we needed to do.

And I said, but many of the people in this congregation haven't heard the gospel not to understand it, not so that it's become a part of their life, not so that they can grasp it, or that's the excuse I made.

And the reply he made is, well, they've had their chance. There's hundreds of people who've never heard it. Well, that's pretty solemn stuff, isn't it?

But that's one of the signs of the times. It's one of the things that has to be, I think, a matter of deep concern to us all, that in the one area where we can cooperate, as it were, with God in a work that he purposes to do and in which he looks for our participation is this great work of preaching the gospel throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations.

[16:45] We don't know what God will do with that, but we do know that we are clearly under mandate to make known the gospel.

And so, what we really need to do when Jesus talks about this, look in verse 34 again. I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.

In that generation to whom Jesus historically addressed that statement, though I think he addresses it to us as well, to this generation, because we only know one generation, nobody knows any more than that.

That's the span of our consciousness in many ways. But speaking to that generation, the event which he was referring to was the fall of Jerusalem, a catastrophic event indeed.

And he said, you've got to understand the fall of Jerusalem in terms of another fall, and that is the end of the world, the coming of Christ, that this is all going to come to an end.

[17:53] And he said, you need to understand that. You see, when a young group came up from the Argentine, and you'll read this on the back page of Topic, our Anglican Diocesan magazine, they visited our churches and said, well, you seem to be concerned about many things, but not telling people about Jesus.

that's what they said. Kind of an interesting feature in the Diocesan magazine.

We need to understand our generation. We need to be able to take the events of our generation and give meaning to them. And you see, I don't think we can any longer say, well, we can tell you how to run your economy so that you will enjoy a higher level of prosperity.

We can tell you about a lifestyle which you've never dreamed of for luxury and for all that's available to you. We can tell you of a technology the wonders of which will confound you.

The rest of the world can tell us a lot about that, too. And perhaps we need to know a lot about it. But the thing that the world needs to know is that the victory of our God, the kingdom, the power, and salvation which belong to our God and his Christ is something that people have to know because that's the ultimate thing.

[19 : 31] And Jesus explains that to his disciples when they're ready for it. Look in verse 35. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

That's why Christians are obsessed with the Bible. That the only thing we have to stand on is not this floor or these pews. The only thing that supports us is the promises of God which he's made to us in his word.

So that when everything else is taken away, the thing which remains is the word of God. And when Jesus says that, he's pointing us right back to the beginning of creation when he says in the beginning was the word.

And God spoke that word and that word resulted in the order of creation. So that he says heaven and earth will pass away, but my word shall not pass away.

In other words, the ultimate reality is the word of God and of his Christ. And that's the only thing we can hold on to. Everything else that we consider real and substantial will ultimately be taken away and all we have is the word of God.

[21 : 02] He teaches that to us individually. It used to be in the wonderful and far off days that when somebody was seriously ill, the doctors had access to them, but prior to the doctor, the minister had access to the patient.

Nowadays, when a doctor comes in, the minister leaves with due apologies for interfering with the wonders of modern medicine. I am smarting a little when I say that. But it used to be, you see, that after medicine had done all that it could and the inevitability of death was there, then the man who had the word of God for that person was the man who had access to that person.

And that's because, Jesus said, heaven and earth will pass away. everything we take to be real will pass away and the only thing that remains will be his word.

That's all we'll have to hold on to is his promise, his word. And so that's how Jesus wants us to learn to be his disciples.

He starts with the fig tree, he moves on to the headlines, he moves on to our generation and our responsibility within our generation, and then he reminds us that the ultimate reality is his word.

[22 : 35] It's not man in relationship to nature, it's man in relationship to the word of God that gives meaning to our lives.

Amen. Amen.

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Nos Nāgamos. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.