

Back to work

A short reflection for working Christians returning to work
in the New Year



January 2012

A reflection for a New Year - Luke 13:6-9

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

"'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Jesus first told this parable as a challenge and a warning to the nation of Israel, but we might also use it to reflect on our own reaction to the world around us. Many of us will be returning to the world of work after a Christmas break, and this will bring with it a whole range of experiences and emotions. For some, it may be a welcome return to a routine with which we are comfortable and familiar, for others it might be the dreaded resumption of struggles and challenges from which Christmas has been a valuable respite. We might be engaging with our work with a renewed sense of resolve, challenged afresh by the Nativity story to reflect the nature of Christ in what we do, or simply refreshed from a break and a chance to relax; ready to take on new challenges, or see through to completion the projects and tasks that we have set aside for a season.

What might this story have to say to such a breadth of experiences? Firstly, we might notice that it is rooted in the cycle of year following year - in this case centred on an agricultural calendar, and each new year has begun with hope and expectation, yet ended in disappointment. Yet this is a challenge to the status quo. The fig tree had failed to bear fruit; this was not a situation that could simply continue unaddressed - in a similar way, the people of Israel had failed to be what God intended them to be; they could not rely on history and heritage alone, they were called to live as a fruitful people in the here and now. This is often a time of year when we reflect on our life's direction and purpose, we might helpfully consider whether our working lives are bearing the fruit that God might require.

Work can often disappoint us, and this is a story that is rooted in disappointment—the tree had failed to bear what was anticipated. The two characters in the story respond in quite different ways. One concentrates on the failed outcome, and determines that the tree is at fault for its barrenness. The other focusses on his role and potential, and asks what else he might have done to achieve the desired end. By adopting this attitude, he sees the potential for success rather than a history of disappointment; he cannot guarantee the outcome, but he does see the opportunity to engage with renewed commitment and hope. He has no control over what is past, but nor does he have to be a slave to it - nature's New Year contains the potential of fruitfulness, despite the failings of years gone by.

We do not know what the year ahead offers; we cannot control every aspect of the workplace environment in which we operate - God will not judge us by the outcomes, but invites us to do what we can to create a potential for fruitfulness. God's call is to be faithful in our discipleship rather than what others might define as successful.

**God of light, whose nature is love and who desires the best for the whole of creation,
Help me to engage in my daily labours,
Not so much concerned with what I might achieve or how others might judge me,
But content in knowing that I have been faithful,
To the values and possibilities of Your Kingdom.
When the world around me has failed to meet my expectations.
Help me to see what I might do to make things different,
Rather than harbouring the disappointment
Of that which is not mine to determine or control.**

AMEN