

## THE BARREN TREE.

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*Then said he to the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?—LUKE XIII. 7.*

News is brought to Christ of a certain judgment, which was not more Pilate's than God's, upon some Galileans, who, while they were sacrificing, were sacrificed, their blood being mingled with the blood of the beasts on the same altar. Lest this should be wholly attributed to Pilate's cruelty, without due respect had of the omnipotent justice, he samples it with another—of eighteen men miscarrying by the fall of a tower. No Pilate threw down this; here was no human executioner: the matter of their death was mortar and stones; these had no purpose to kill them. This therefore must be an invisible hand working by an insensible creature: the instrument may be diverse, the judge is the same.

Now, *pœna paucorum, terror omnium*. As an exhalation drawn from the earth, fired and sent back again to the earth, smites only one place, but terrifieth the whole country: so their ruins should be our terrors; let them teach us, that they may not touch us. They are hitherto but like Moses's rod turned into a serpent; not into a bear or lion, lest it should have devoured Pharaoh, but into a serpent, that he might be more afraid than hurt. It is God's special favour to us, that others be made examples for us, and not we made examples for others. Nothing could teach them; let them teach us.

Of these fearful instances, our Saviour makes this use, setting down a peremptory conclusion: *Vel pœnitendum, vel pereundum*,—‘Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.’ Such vengeance is no way to be avoided but by repentance. But here the Jews might flatter themselves, If we be greater sinners than they, how comes it to pass that we speed better than they? To this silent objection Christ makes an apologetical answer, ver. 6. You are not spared because you are more righteous, but because God to you is more gracious. You deserve such or sorer judgments: and the reason of this impunity is not to be looked for in your innocence, but in the Lord's patience; not because you are not worse to him, but because he is better to you; who offers you space and grace to amend, if (at least) at last you will bring forth the fruits of repentance.

There be some terms in the text, (as that the vineyard is the church, every Christian a fig-tree, God the owner, every pastor a dresser,) wherein your understandings may well prevent my discourse: these known and familiar things I take as granted of all hands.

It is a parable therefore not to be forced every way, nor made to warrant a conclusion which the author never meant. This were, when it 'offers us its company a mile, to compel it to go with us twain,' or to make Christ's messenger speak our errand. Such is the trade of Rome; what their own policy hath made necessary, they will teach God to make good: this is to pick darkness out of the sun. No, *verificatur in sensu suo*, like a good creature, it does only that it was made for. A parable is not like a looking-glass, to represent all forms and faces; but a well-drawn picture, to remonstrate that person whereof it is a counterfeit. It is like a knife: with the haft it cuts not, with the back it cuts not; it cuts with the edge. A candle is made to light us, not to heat us; a stove is made to heat us, not to light us: if this parable, like the sun, may give both light and heat, the more profitable, the more acceptable.

*The distribution.*—'Then said he to the dresser,' &c. That part of it to which I limit my present discourse delivers itself to us in these four passages:—1. A *consultation*: 'Then said he to the dresser of his vineyard.' 2. A *complaint*: 'Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none.' 3. A *sentence*: 'Cut it down.' 4. A *reason*: 'Why cumberers it the ground?'

1. The *consultation*: 'Then said he unto,' &c.

(1.) *Dixit, non percussit*,—he spake, he stroke not: he might have spared words, and begun with wounds. The tree had rather deserved the axe and fire than a consultation of recovery. How easily would man have rejected his hopeless brother! As when a piece of clay will not work to his mind, the potter throws it away; or we cast foul rags to the dunghill, little thinking that they may become white paper. But with God, *verba antecedunt verbera*,—he will be heard before he be felt. Our first parents, when they had sinned, *vocem audiverunt*, 'heard the voice of God,' Gen. iii. 8. He reasoned with them before he condemned them. If the father's word can correct the child, he will let the rod alone. Wicked men use the sudden arguments of steel and iron; as Joab discoursed with Amasa 'in the fifth rib,' 2 Sam. xx. 10: they speak daggers' points. So Zedekiah disputed with the prophet: a word and a blow, 1 Kings xxii. 24; yea, a blow without a word: he struck him first, and spoke to him afterwards. God deals otherwise: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock,' Rev. iii. 20. He knocks at the door, does not presently break it open. He gives us warning of his judgments, that gave him no warning of our sins. Why doth he thus? That we might see our miserable estate, and fall to timely deprecation; that so punishing ourselves, we might save him a labour.

(2.) *Dixit, non destinavit*: as if the Lord would double and repeat his thoughts, before he decreed it to irrevocable ruin. A divine precedent of moderation! If he that cannot transgress in his wrath, nor exceed in his justice, will yet *consulere amicum*, advise with his friend, how ought frail man to suspend his furious purposes to mature deliberation! It is too common with us, to attempt dangerous and desperate actions without further counsel than our own green thoughts; so anger is made a solicitor, passion a judge, and rashness an executioner. The wise man first considers, then speaks or does: the madman first speaks or does, and then considers; which drives him on necessity to play the after-game—with shame and sorrow to

recover his former estate, or give it lost for ever. O holy deliberation ! whither art thou fled ? David's harp did cast the evil spirit out ; this would keep him from ever coming in. It is a porter at the gate of God's spiritual temple, man ; that would be as sure to keep out his enemies, as David would have been ready to let in his friends. How many desperate precipices of sin would be prevented were this rule remembered, *Consule cultorem !* For matter of estate, we are counselled by the lawyer ; for health of body, advised by the physician ; we trust the pilot to steer our course by sea, the surveyor to mete out our land : but for the soul, let it be as barren as this fig-tree, we take no counsel of the gardener. Do worldlings consult the preacher concerning their usurious trade, before they undertake it ? Do gallants advise with him, before they meet in Aceldama, the field of blood ? Oh that they would admit an answer from such a friend, before they give an answer to such an enemy !

(3.) *Dixit vinitori.* Such is the honour God doth his ministers, to acquaint them with his own purposes. 'Surely the Lord will do nothing, but he first revealeth it to his servants the prophets,' Amos iii. 7. Nothing, which may conduce to the office of their ministry and the good of his church. 'To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,' Luke viii. 10. 'To you ;' not to the world, they have no such revelation. 'It is given ;' it is none of your inheritance, you were not born to it. 'To know mysteries,' *sapere alta*, not common things. 'Of the kingdom,' not secular, such mysteries are for the knowledge of statizing Jesuits, but 'of heaven.' 'Shall I hide from Abraham the thing that I mean to do ?' Gen. xviii. 17. The matter concerned Sodom, not Abraham ; yet it was revealed to Abraham, not to Sodom. But doth God need any man's counsel ? 'Who hath at any time been his counsellor ?' Rom. xi. 34. Will the potter take advice of his pots ? No ; when Christ asked Philip where supply of bread might be had for the multitude, 'this he said to prove him : for himself knew what he would do,' John vi. 6. His questions are not his but our satisfactions. Thus doth he credit his own ordinance, teaching the world how to esteem of them whom himself so singularly honours. How poor a place soever they find in men's thoughts, the King of heaven and earth calls them to his counsel. *Priest* was a title whereof the princes of Israel were ambitious : they would not every man have written his name upon his rod, but in hope that this dignity might fall to his lot, Num. xvii. Now, is the ministry of the gospel inferior to that of the law ? Was the service of death more glorious than the service of life and salvation ? If the evangelical covenant be better, is the ministration worse ? The sons of the great think scorn of such an employment : what they held an honour, these count a disparagement. In one and the same subject meets their ambition and our scorn. It is ill when the fig-tree shall despise the dresser, but it would be far worse if the dresser should despise the fig-tree.

(4.) 'To the dresser.' This is the whole congregation of his ministers, to whom he hath committed the culture of his vineyard. All which, by an *enallage numeri*, are summed up in one dresser : *quia cor unum*, because they have all one heart, Acts iv. 32 ; *quia officium unum*, all their labours meet in that one common term, the 'edification of the body of Christ,' Eph. iv. 12 ; it is usual to name one *pro cæteris*, for all the rest. Peter says, 'Though I should die with thee, I will not deny thee.' Did Peter only promise this ? No ; but 'so said likewise the rest of the disciples,' Matt. xxvi. 35. Had not this been a parable, I never found a place of more probable colour for the high priest of Rome to challenge his universal supremacy by.

But surely he will never dress Christ's vineyard as it ought, unless in a parable. Nay, would his instruments forbear to sow it with brambles, to manure it with blood, and to cast Naboth out of his own vineyard, it were somewhat. But let them pass. When the Spirit wrote to a whole church, he inscribes his epistle under one particular name, *Angelo ecclesiae*, 'To the angel of the church,' Rev. ii. and iii.

(5.) 'To the dresser.' Dressing implies labour and heedfulness. I might here touch upon the minister's diligence, that Christ's vineyard never lie rude and unpolished through his default. But this age will look to that well enough : never did the Egyptians call so fast upon the Israelites for making of bricks, as the people call on us for making of sermons ; and our allowance of materials is much alike. They think it recompense bountiful enough to praise our pains ; as if we could live, like chameleons, upon the subtle air of commendations. So they serve us as carriers do their horses ; lay heavy burdens upon their backs, and then hang bells at their ears to make them music. But be our reward little or much, God forbid we should slack dressing the vineyard of Jesus Christ.

(6.) 'To the dresser.' Why to him ? *Ut intercederet*, that he might plead for the tree. So unwilling is God to destroy, that he would have us manacle his hands with our prayers : he would be entreated to forbear. 'Go thy ways down, for the people which thou broughtest out of Egypt have corrupted themselves,' Exod. xxxii. 7. Why this to Moses ? That he might pray for them. He that meant to spare them in mercy, meant withal that Moses should be beholden to him for that mercy. And Moses indeed chargeth the Lord, sets upon him with so holy a violence, that as if his prayers could *vincere invincibilem*, he hears, 'Let me alone.' Oh that every vine-dresser were full of this gracious affection to the trees under his charge ! Yea, who fears God, and in some measure hath it not ? The people forgot Moses, Moses remembers the people ; they could be merry and happy without him, he would not be happy without them. Men rob us of our means, load us with reproaches ; all our revenge is to solicit heaven for them by our supplications : they sue us, we sue for them : they impoverish our temporal condition, we pray for their eternal salvation. We could never hope for good to ourselves, if we should not return them this good for their evil.

Korah had drawn a multitude to rebel against Moses and Aaron ; Moses and Aaron pray for the rebels, Num. xvi. 22. They were worthy of death, and they had it ; yet would these merciful leaders have prevented it, refusing to buy their own peace with the loss of such enemies. Yea, they are so far from carving their own just revenge, that they would not have the Lord to revenge for them. Let us fill our hearts with this great example : the people rise up against their pastors, the pastors fall on their faces for the people. Certainly, if God had not meant to hear us, he would never invite us to pray. But as it pleaseth him to make us his mouth to you, so also your mouth to him : both to tell you what he doth say, and to return him what you should say ; to preach against your sins, to pray for your souls. Do you hear us plead for Christ, for Christ hears us plead for you. Indeed, we are men of polluted lips and lives ; but as God's power is not straitened through our weakness, so nor is his mercy lessened through our unworthiness. Therefore, as Paul had his *Væ mihi si non prædicavero*,—'Woe unto me if I preach not ;' so Moses, in effect, had his *Væ mihi si non intercessero*,—'Woe unto me if I pray not !' 'God forbid I should cease praying for you.' But as all our preaching can work no good upon you but through the Holy Ghost, so all our praying can bring no good to you but through

Jesus Christ. We pray for you; forget not you to pray for us. Indeed, weak ones pray with us, malicious ones pray against us, covetous ones prey upon us, few pray for us. We entreat for you, do you entreat for us; and that only Mediator betwixt God and man plead for us all!

2. *The complaint*: 'Behold, I come,' &c. This hath in it two passages—(1.) His access: 'Behold, these three years,' &c.; (2.) His success: 'I find none.'

(1.) First, the access: *Behold*.—*Ecce* is here a note of complaint. He that can thunder down sin with vengeance rains on it showers of complaint. 'Behold the tree;' he might in a moment have put it past beholding by throwing it into the infernal furnace. Why doth he complain that can compel? *Habet in manu potentiam, in corde patientiam*,—There is power in his hand, but patience in his heart. To do justice, we, after a sort, constrain him; but his delight is to be merciful.

He complains. All complain of lost labours: the shepherd, after all his vigilance, complains of straggling lambs; the gardener, after all his diligence, of withering plants; the husbandman, after all his toil, of lean fields and thin harvests; merchants, after many adventures, of wrecks and piracies; tradesmen, of bad debtors, and scarcity of moneys; lawyers complain of few clients; and divines, of fewer converts. Thus we complain one of another; but God hath just cause to complain of us all.

Well, if the Lord complain of sin, let not us make ourselves merry with it. Like Samson, it may make us sport for a while, but will at last pull down the house upon our heads. 'The voice of the turtle is' not 'heard in our land,' Cant. ii. 12. *Vox turturis, vox gementis*. True penitents be more rare than turtles. The voice of the sparrow we hear, chirping lust; of the night-bird, buzzing ignorance; the voice of the screech-owl, croaking blasphemy; of the popinjay, gaudy pride; the voice of the kite and cormorant, covetousness and oppression: these, and other birds of that wing, be common. But *non audita est vox turturis*. Who mourns for the sin of the time, and longs to be freed from the time of sin? It was an unhappy spectacle in Israel to see at once *lachrymantem Dominum et ridentem populum*,—a weeping Saviour and deriding sinners. We complain of our crosses and losses; we complain of our maladies, of our injuries, enemies, miseries: the Lord open our eyes, and soften our hearts, to see and feel the cause of all, and to complain of our sins!

*I come*.—The Lord had often sent before, now he came himself; even by his personal presence, accepting our nature. The Son of God, that made us the sons of men, became the Son of man to make us the sons of God. He came voluntarily: we come into the world, not by our own wills, but by the will of our parents; Christ came by his own will. He came not for his own benefit, but ours. What profit doth the sun receive by our looking on him? We are the better for his light, not he for our sight. A shower of rain that waters the earth gets nothing to itself; the earth fares the better for it. He came for our fruits; these cannot enrich him: 'Lord, our well-doing extendeth not to thee,' Ps. xvi. 2.

Never came such an inhabitant to our country as Jesus. Had God granted men the liberty to beg of him what they would, and have it, they durst not have been so bold as to ask his only Son. When the king gives a free concession to his subject, to make choice of his own suit without denial, he will not be so impudent as to beg the prince. Let us entertain him well, we fare the better for him: the profit of our redemption blesseth all the rest unto us. Far be it from us to welcome him with scandals, with

blasphemies and neglect. He may then reply, as Absalom to Hushai, 'Is this thy kindness to thy friend?' 2 Sam. xvi. 17. No, you say, we make much of him, hold him in the highest regard, trust him with our whole salvation. But know, Christ fares not the better for thy faith, but for thy charity. Faith is a beggarly receiver, charity is a rich giver. Thy faith is a hand that takes something from him to enrich thyself; thy charity is a hand that gives something to him in his distressed members. Indeed Christ is the subject of all tongues, but he is not the object of all hearts. The school disputes of him, the pulpit preaches of him, profession talks of him, profane men swear by him; few love him, few serve him. He is come, let him be made welcome, by setting our best cheer and choicest fruits before him. Whom should we entertain, if not our Saviour?

*Seeking.*—But did not he know before? What need he seek that hath found? He that 'understands our thoughts' long before they are born, cannot be nescious of our works when they are done. My answer shall be short: the Lord's *Quærit* is a *Requirat*; he doth not seek a thing that is hid from him, but requires a debt that is due unto him.

*Seeking.*—This is no rare, but a continued act. It is not *Veni*, I came: 'He came unto his own,' &c., John i. 11. Nor a *Venturus sum*, 'Yet a little while, and I will come,' Rev. xxii. But ἐρχομαι ζητῶν: as, Rev. iii. 20, *Sto pulsans*, 'I stand knocking'; so here, *Venio quærens*, 'I come seeking.' He seeks continually: will you hear how long?

*These three years.*—Much time hath been spent about the interpretation of this time; how it is applicable to the Jewish synagogue, to whom it was immediately referred. I find no great difference among expositors, saving only in their terms. Some by the first year understand the time before the captivity; by the second, their return to Jewry; by the last, the coming of Christ. Some by the first year conceive the law given by Moses; by the second, the prophetic attestations; by the third, the grace of our Lord Jesus. Some resolve it thus: the first year was the time of circumcision, from Abraham to Moses; the next, the Levitical law, from Moses to Christ; the last is the year of salvation by the Messiah. Others understand the first year to be of the patriarchs, the middle year of the judges, the third of the kings. After all this he was entreated to forbear it a fourth year, till it was instructed by the apostles; and then being found fruitless, it was cut down by the Romans. But I rather take a definite number to be put for an indefinite; three years is time long enough to wait for the proof of a tree: such a proportionable expectation had the Lord for that church. If literally you would have it, I take this to be the probable exposition. These three years were the very three years of his preaching, healing diseases, casting out devils, working miracles before their faces. The other year which he added was the time while the apostles offered them the gospel of salvation. Whereof the refusers were cut down, the accepters were saved.

He hath likewise waited for the church of Christianity three years; that is, three revolutions of ages, thrice five hundred years. Or he hath tarried the leisure of the whole world three years: the first year, under nature; the second, under the law; the third, under grace; the fourth is now a-passing, and who knows how far it is spent?

Or to apply it to ourselves: these three years of our visitation hath been so many scores of years. Conceive the foremost to be in the days of King Edward the Sixth, who purged the gold from the rust and dross of superstition, ignorance, and cozenage which it had contracted. The sun began to shine out in his bright lustre: the Lord came seeking our fruits; but not

finding them answerable to his expectation, not worthy of the glorious gospel, he drew another cloud over our sun; teaching us better to value that heavenly manna wherewith we were so suddenly grown wanton. The second year, under Queen Elizabeth, of so blessed memory; that royal nurse, upon whose bosom the church of God leaned to take her rest. She did again vindicate this vineyard, which had so long lain among friars and monks, that it had almost quite forgotten the language of Canaan: she taught it anew to speak the dialect of the Holy Ghost. When that gracious queen was taken from a crown of gold to a diadem of glory, then began our third year, wherein our present sovereign was sent: *dignissimus regno, si non natus ad regnum*,—under whom we know not whether our truth or peace be more; only let us bless him, and bless God for him, that we may all be blessed in him. Thus far we may say of our land, as Sylvius did of Rhodes, *Semper in sole sita est*,—The bright reflection of the gospel compasseth us round about. Now he comes this third year seeking our fruits; which when we consider, we can say no more but *Miserere Deus*, Lord be merciful to us; for never were such blessings requited with such unthankfulness. We condemn the Jews for abusing Christ's patience: God grant they rise not up at the last day to condemn us!

He comes to particular man three years:—*First*, In youth: I have planted thee in my vineyard, given thee the influence of my mercies; where is thy fruitfulness? Alas! the young man sends him away, with a *Nondum tempus flicorum*,—It is too early for me to fall to mortification; would you put me to penance before I have had the leisure and pleasure to offend? He is ready to send Christ away in the language of that foul spirit, 'Art thou come to torment me before my time?' But whose charge is it to 'Remember thy Creator' *diebus juventutis*? Then the conquest is most glorious, because then it is most difficult. You say, It is never too late; but I am sure it is never too soon, to be gracious and holy. The devil is a false sexton, and sets back the clock of time in prosperity; in the day of trouble, he will make it run fast enough. *Secondly*, In middle age; and now the 'buying of farms,' and 'trying of beasts,' the pleasures of matrimony, the cares for posterity, take up all the rooms of the soul. Men rather busy themselves to gather the fruits of earth than to yield the fruits of heaven. Here is strength of nature and fulness of stature, but still a defect of grace. Perhaps Christ hath now some fair promises of fruits hereafter: 'Let me first go bury my father, then,' Luke ix. 61. But (a thousand to one) he finds something *in domo*, left by his father, that keeps him *à Domino*, from following his Master. To prevent this, it is his caution to the entertained servant: Ps. xlv. 10, 'Forget thine own people, and thy father's house:' rather forego and forget thy father's house than thy Maker's service. *Thirdly*, In old age: now the decay of body should argue a decay of sin. The taste finds no relish in riot, the ears cannot distinguish music, the eyes are dim to pleasing objects, very 'desire fails:' now all things promise mortification. He that cannot stir abroad in the world, what should he do but recollect himself, and settle his thoughts on the world to come? Now fruits, or never. Not yet; morosity, pride, and avarice, are the three diseases of old age: men covet most when they have time to spend least; as cheating tradesmen then get up most commodities into their hands when they mean to break. Still he comes seeking fruit, and is returned with a *Non inventus*.

If yet it were but as the prophet's sign to Hezekiah,—'This year ye shall eat such as groweth of itself; and the second year such as springeth of the same; and in the third year ye shall sow and reap,' &c.,—the third year

might afford him somewhat. But doth he forbear all trees thus long? No; some are snatched away in the flower and pride of their life; yea, they be not few that will not allow themselves to live, but with riot and intemperance hasten their own ends, before they have well begun or learned what life is: like bad scholars, that slubber out their books before they have learned their lessons. That instead of *Non est fructus*, we may say, *Non est fœcus*, the tree itself is gone. And that goodly person, which like a fair ship hath been long a-building, and was but yesterday put to sea, is to day sunk in the main. We do not eat, drink, and sleep, and take such refections of nature, *ut non moriamur*, that we might not die,—that is impossible,—but that we should not die barren, but bear some fruits up with us to him that made the tree.

*Seeking.*—It is fit we should offer our fruits to God, and not put him to seek for his own. We should be like those ‘ripe figs that fall into the mouth of the eater,’ Nahum iii. 12. The best liquors are they that drop from their cells of their own accord, without pressing. The most acceptable of all oblations be the free-will-offerings. Howsoever, let us be sure not to disappoint the Lord when he seeks.

*On this fig-tree.*—It is fit that he that plants a vineyard should taste of the wine, Prov. xxvii. 18: good reason his own tree should yield him some fruit; considering what he hath done for it, he may well challenge it.

[1.] He hath planted us: we spring not up naturally, as the oak grows from an acorn, the peach from a stone; but a gracious hand hath set us. ‘We are not born of flesh, nor of the will of blood, nor of man, but of God,’ John i. 13.

[2.] He hath planted us in his vineyard, within the enclosed garden of the church. Had he left us to the unregarded wilderness, without any dresser to look to us, there might have been some excuse of our barrenness. The ground that is left to itself is, in a manner, blameless, though it be fruitless. But *in vinea sua*, which he hath fenced in with his providence, blessed with his saving influence, husbanded with his dresser’s diligence, forwarded with the beams of mercy, and showers more precious than the ‘dews of Hermon that fell upon the hill of Zion;’ where we participate the fatness of the ground, are fed with unperishing manna, compassed about with songs of deliverance, and have ‘seen our desires upon’ his and ‘our enemies;’ where righteousness is our walls, and peace our bulwarks, and the ways be milk where we set our feet.

[3.] We are fig-trees, not brambles; no man expects ‘grapes from thorns,’ Matt. vii. 16. Not oaks or cedars, to be a dwelling for the storks, but fig-trees apt for fruit, pleasant fruit. If the rest be fruitless, they serve for other purposes; but what shall become of the barren fig-tree?

[4.] He is our Lord, and, *querit suum*, he seeks but his own. If our own kine give us no milk, our own sheep afford us no wool, our own land returns us no increase, we are displeased; whereas these be reasonless creatures, but we have sense above common nature, reason above sense, grace above reason. We are but tenants of these, Christ is Lord of us; our sins bring the curse of barrenness upon them, but there is no fault in God if we be unfruitful.

[5.] He comes seeking: not threatening, raging, wounding; not felling down the tree, nor stocking it up by the roots; but seeking. *Dignatur expectare fructus, cui licet eradicare infructuosos*,—Man is a loser by the barrenness of his garden tree; were there not a tree left, God is never the poorer.

Now lay all these together: a Lord that owes us, we are his trees; to come into his vineyard, where he may be confident; we live on his ground;



to look upon a fig-tree, made of an apt disposition to good fruit ; such a one as himself hath planted, not casually grown up ; a tree not neglected, but whereon he hath bestowed great care and cost ; waiting, not destroying : what can we plead for it if it be fruitless ? God is our Lord and proprietary, England is his vineyard, every one of us his fig-tree, thus planted, watered, blessed by his gracious mercy. He comes to us with patience, that should run to him with penitence ; seeking our fruits, that should make tender of them unsought ; waiting, that might command : now, fear, obedience, and thankfulness keep us from sending him back with a *Non invenio*,—‘ I find none !’

*Fruit.*—This is that inseparable effect that God expects from every tree planted in his garden. We are married to Christ : to what end ? ‘ That we should bring forth fruits unto God,’ Rom. vii. 4. He seeks not for leaves, buds, or blossoms, but fruits. Could leaves content him, we would not leave him unsatisfied ; he should have an arbour large enough to reach to ‘ the world’s end,’ Ps. xix. 4. Our tongues run apace, not seldom faster than our wits. We are God’s debtors, and if he will take our words, so : that is all he is like to have. Might buds please him, or blossoms ; we have intentions to good, certain offers and shows of obedience, which we wear like a cloak, or some loose garment, that when lust calls we may quickly slip off. But when he seeks for works, all our consonants be turned into mutes, we are speechless, Matt. xxii. 12. Oh, would he ask us for anything but fruits ! but what should be expected from the fig-tree but figs ?

Of every soul here he seeks for fruits. Of the magistrate, that he bring forth the fruits of justice ; determining causes with sincerity of decision and convenience of expedition ; being, so far as equity permits, a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless. Of the minister, that he bring forth the fruits of knowledge. Aaron’s rod was his pastoral staff : in one and the same night it brought forth buds, and blossoms, and fruit. Fruitfulness is the best argument that God hath called us : there is not a plant of his setting but the very branches thereof shall flourish. I do not say our pains shall always convert many souls ; that is God’s fruits, not ours. He chargeth us to be industrious in preaching, let himself alone with the work of saving. Of the private man, he expects the fruit of his calling : to be idle is to be barren of good ; and to be barren of good is to be pregnant of all evil. *Bella gerant alii, Protesilaus edit* : but let us that are called to work, work in our calling, otherwise at last we shall make but a sorry answer to that question, *Ubi fructus* ? Let us all produce the fruits of charity ; rich men do good turns to themselves,—as they play at tennis, tossing the ball to him that will toss it to them again,—seldom to the poor, for they are not able to bandy it back. Pride cuts, and riot shuffles, but betwixt them both they deal the poor but a bad game. The fruit of Christianity is mercy ; when the rich, like full ears of corn, humble themselves to the poor earth in charity. Feed him that feeds you ; give him part of your temporals, from whom you expect eternal : you clothe Christ with your blacks on earth, he will clothe you with his glorious whites in heaven. Our mercy to others is the fruit of God’s mercy to us.

*Fruit.*—Nothing is created for itself, but so placed by the most wise providence, that it may confer something to the public good, though it be but as the widow’s two mites to the treasury. The poorest creature yields some fruit, wherein it doth imitate the goodness of the Maker. We know not readily what good serpents and vermin may do ; yet certainly they have their fruit, both in sucking up that poison of the earth, which would be contagious

to man ; in setting off the beauty of the better pieces of creation,\*—for though the same hand made both the angels in heaven and the worms on earth, yet the angels appear the more glorious, being so compared,—besides their hidden virtues abstracted from our knowledge. Of stones they make iron, rubbish serves to raise bulwarks, the small pebble for the sling, worms and flies are baits for fishes ; everything is enabled with some gift for the universal benefit, and so to produce those fruits is their natural work.

The sun comes forth of his chamber like a bridegroom, fresh and lively ; and rejoiceth as a giant, to run his diurnal course, to lighten us with his refulgent beams, to generate, cheer, and mature things with his parental heat : this is his fruit. In his absence, the moon and stars adorn the canopy of heaven, reflecting their operative influence to quicken the lower world : this is their fruits. The curled clouds, those bottles of rain, thin as the liquor they contain, fly up and down on the wings of the wind, delivering their moist burdens upon the earth, teats whereon the hungry fields and pastures do suck ; yet they expect no harvest from us : this is their fruits. The subtle winds come puffing out of their caverns, to make artificial motions, wholesome airs, and navigable seas ; yet neither earth, air, nor sea return them recompense : this is their fruits. The earth, in a thankful imitation of the heavens, locks not up her treasures within her own coffers ; but without respect of her private benefit, is liberal of her allowance, yielding her fatness and riches to innumerable creatures that hang on her breasts, and depend upon her as their common mother for maintenance. Of the beasts that feed upon her, kine give us their milk, sheep their wool ; every one pays a tribute to man, their usufructuary lord : this is their fruits. Fruit-bearing trees spend not all their sap and moisture upon themselves, or the increase of their own magnitudes ; but the principal and purer part of it is concocted into some pleasant fruits, whereof neither they nor their young springs ever come to taste ; but they proffer it us, and when it is ripe, they voluntarily let it fall at their masters' feet. Never did the olive anoint itself with its own oil, nor the vine make itself drunk with its own grapes, nor the tree in my text devour its own figs : yet they all strive to abound with fruits.

Let me raise your meditations from earth to heaven : the holy angels there are called 'ministering spirits ;' those royal armies fight for us against our enemies ; like nurses, they bear us up in their arms, and, though unseen, do glorious offices for us : this is part of their fruit. The blessed Trinity is always working : 'Hitherto my Father worketh, and I work,' John v. 17. The Father by his providence and protection, the Son by his mercy and mediation, the Holy Ghost by his grace and sanctification ; all dividing the streams of their goodness for the best behoof of the world. The more anything furthers the common good, the more noble is its nature, and more resembling the Creator.

The earth is fruitful ; the sea, the air, the heavens are fruitful ; and shall not man bring forth fruits, for whom all these are fruitful ? While all the armies of heaven and earth are busied in fructifying, shall man, of more singular graces and faculties, be idle, a burden to the world and himself ? Both the church of God for the propagation of piety, and the world itself for the upholding of his state, require our fruits. If happiness consisted in doing nothing, God, that meant Adam so happy, would never have set him about business ; but as paradise was his storehouse, so also his workhouse : his pleasure was his task. There is no state of man that can privilege a folded hand. Our life is *vita pulveris, non pulvinaris*. Lands, means, and moneys,

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men make the protections of idleness ; whereas Adam commanded the whole earth, yet work expected him. In paradise all things did labour for man, now man must labour for all things. Adam did work because he was happy, we his children must work that we may be happy. Heaven is for joys, hell for pains, earth for labour. God hath three houses ; this is his workhouse, that above is his warehouse. Oh, then, let us be fruitful, that others' benefit may be ours, our benefit theirs, and the glory of all the Lord's. If magistrates yield not the fruits of justice, ministers the fruits of knowledge, private men the fruits of charity and obedience ; it is as unnatural as if the sun should forget to shine, or the earth to fructify. God made all these for man, he made man for himself ; of us he looks for fruit, of us let him find it, from us accept it, in us increase it, and to us reward it, through him in whom alone we expect mercy, Jesus Christ.

(2.) The success follows. *Non invenio*. We have brought the Lord into his vineyard, heard him calling for the dresser, shewing him a tree, telling him of a three years' expectation ; now, if after all this we inquire for the event, himself certifies us, *Ὁὐχ εὕρισκω*, 'I find none.'

None ? Peradventure he came before the season,—*nondum tempus erat ficorum*. When should a tree bring forth fruits, but *tempore suo* ? This is the praise of the good tree, Ps. i. 3, that it 'brings forth the fruit in due season.' If the fig-tree could have objected to the owner, as Elisha to his servant, *Hocce tempus*,—'Is this a time to plant vineyards, or gather fruits ?' 2 Kings v. 26. Or, as the man replied to his neighbour, that came to borrow loaves at midnight, Luke xi. 7, 'Is this a time to lend bread, when myself and family are in bed ?' The spring is the season of fructifying, the autumn of gathering. When 'the time of the singing of birds is come, then the fig-tree puts forth her green figs,' Cant. ii. 12, 13. *Not cum fermento perfundatur pulvis*, when 'the dust is leavened with mire,' Job xxxviii. 38, and the bands of Orion have locked up the influence of heaven. Who seeks fruit in winter, he must be content with winter-fruit. There is the winter of an afflicted conscience : no marvel then if neither ripe figs, nor so much as green leaves appear ; when all the sap is retired to the root, as in extreme cold the blood runs to the heart to succour it. When the Babylonians required of their captive Israelites some Hebrew songs, they could soon answer : 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land ?' Ps. cxxxvii. 4. Is this a time or place to be merry ? But did the Lord come out of season ? No, he required it not the first day, or month, but waited the full time, expecting fruit in the autumn or vintage season. *Non ante tempus querit, qui per triennium venit*.\* He came not with a triennial visitation, as episcopal fathers use to visit, once in three years ; but every year, every month in the year, week of the month, day of the week. Of another fig-tree it is said, that 'the time of figs was not yet,' yet he cursed it, Mark xi. 13. Here the time was three years past without fruit, yet he cursed it not. But look to it : if thou wilt not fructify *tempore tuo*, thou shalt be cut down *tempore non tuo*, perish before thy time, Eccles. vii. 17. There is not a day in the year wherein he forbears seeking our fruit ; yet *Venio, non invenio*, 'I find none.'

None ? *Nunquid quia male quæsit Dominus* ? Was there an error in his search ? Men often seek *bona*, good things, *non bene*, not in a good manner. Either they fail in their *quando* : as Joseph sought Christ after a 'day's journey ;' whereas he is too precious to be missed one hour : 'They shall seek thee,' *tempore inveniendi*, 'when thou mayest be found,' Ps. xxxii. 6. Or in the right *ubi* : as Mary sought her son *in cognitione carnis*, 'among

\* Gloss.

her kindred ;' who was *in domo patris*, in the temple. So the Papists seek now him in pictures, who promised to be found in the Scriptures. Or in their *quomodo* : as they that seek *aliud pro illo, aliud præ illo*, another instead of him, another besides him, another with him, another before him, which they do not seek for him. All these seek and miss, because they seek amiss. The world is commonly mistaken in their search ; *quærunt bona locis non suis*,—they seek for things out of their proper orbs. Men seek honour in pride, whereas honour is to be found in humility. They seek reputation in bloody revenge ; alas ! that is to be found in patience : 'It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence.' They seek content in riches, which is as if one should seek for fresh water in the midst of the sea. But in none of these circumstances did this seeker fail ; not in the *ubi*, for he sought in the vineyard ; not in the *quando*, for he came in the vintage ; not in the *quomodo*, for he sought fruit on that fig-tree about which he had been at so great charges : yet 'I find none.'

None? Haply not so thick with fruits as the 'vines of Engedi ;' every land is not a Canaan, to flow with milk and honey. But yet some competent measure, enough to pay the landlord rent for the ground it stands on ; no, 'none.' If there be none to spare, whereof the owner may make money, yet *sufficiat ad usum suum, ad esum suum*,—that he may eat the labours of his own hands ; no, 'none.' If the number be not 'as the sand,' yet let there be 'a remnant,' Rom. ix. 27. If there cannot be a whole harvest, yet let there be 'a tenth,' Isa. vi. 13. If not a tenth, yet let there be some 'gleanings,' Micah vii. 1 ; and that is a woeful scarcity. If the gleanings be not allowed, yet let there be here and there a fig, a grape, a berry, 'on the outmost branches,' Isa. xvii. 6, that the planter may have a taste. It is too defective, when *non florebit ficus*,—the tree doth not flourish ; but *quando non erit uva in vitibus, non ficus in ficulneis*, Hab. iii. 17,—when there shall not be 'a grape on the vine, nor a fig on the tree,' Jer. viii. 13 ; this is a miserable sterility. Something hath some savour, but none is good for nothing. Indeed all trees are not equally loaden ; there is the measure of a hundred, of sixty, of thirty ; an omer, and an ephah ; but the sacred dews of heaven, the graces of the gospel, bless us from having none ! 'I find none.'

None? Peradventure none such as he looks for, no fruits delicate enough for the Almighty's taste. Indeed, our best fruits are never perfect and kindly ripened ; still they relish sour and earthly, and savour of the stock from which they were taken. They are heavenly plants, but grow in a foreign and cold climate ; not well concocted, not worthy the charges and care bestowed upon us. Set orange or fig-trees in this our cold country, the fruit will not quit the cost of the planting and maintaining. But the complaint is not here of the imperfection or paucity of fruits, but of the nullity : 'none.' Some reading that text with idle eyes, that after all our fruits, we are still 'unprofitable trees,' Luke xvii. 10, because they can find no validity of merit in their works, throw the plough in the hedge, and make holiday. But shall not the servant do his master's business, because he cannot earn his master's inheritance ? Shall the mason say, I will share with my sovereign in his kingdom, or I will not lay a stone in his building ? Yet good fruits have their reward ; though not by the merit of the doer, yet by the mercy of the acceptor. Sour they be of themselves, but in Christ they have their sweetening ; and the meanest fruits which that great 'Angel of the Covenant' shall present to his Father, with the addition of his own 'precious incense,' Rev. viii. 4, are both received and rewarded. In their own nature they may be corrupt ; but being dyed in the blood of Christ,

they are made pleasing to God; yea, also profitable to the church, and useful to men, seem they never so poor. Even a troubled spring doth often quench a distressed soldier's thirst; a small candle doth good where the greater lights be absent; and the meanest fruit of holy charity, even a cup, though it be not of the juice of the grapes out of the vineyard, but of cold water out of the tankard, in the name of Christ, shall have its recompense, Matt. x. 42. But here the complaint is not of the meanness or fewness, but of the barrenness: none at all.

None? *'Every tree is known by its fruits,'* it is Christ's everlasting rule. Howsoever the tree lives by the sap, and not by the fruits; yet it is known to live by the fruits, and not by the sap, for this is hidden. 'The just man lives by his faith,' not by his works; but he is known to live by his works, not by his invisible faith. Neither doth the fruit make good the tree, but the tree makes good the fruit. *Opera bona non faciunt justum, justus facit bona opera.* Good works make not a man righteous, but the righteous man doth good works. Our persons are justified before our actions; as of necessity the tree must be good before it can bear good fruit. But how shall that tree be discerned that hath no fruit? 'I find none.'

None? Why this to us? Why such a text in such a time? We abound with fruits; which way can you look, and not have your eye full of our works? They before, in such places, have successively commended our fruits. Be it so; yet Euripides being questioned why he always made women bad in his plays, whereas Sophocles ever made them good in his, answered, 'Sophocles makes them such as they ought to be, but I make them such as indeed they are.' Their former commendations have told us what we should be; but this emblem, I fear, tells us truly what we are. Not all of us; God forbid! Here is but one fig-tree in a whole vineyard thus taxed, and far be it from us to tax a whole vineyard for one barren fig-tree.

None? Yes; enough of some fruits, but the prophet calls them *ficos valde malos*,—'so bad that they cannot be eaten,' Jer. xxiv. 8. As the fruit of the vine is commended for quickness, the fruit of the olive for fatness, so the fruit of the fig-tree for sweetness, in Jotham's parable, Judg. ix. But if it bear not *fructum nativitatis sue*, the fruit of its own kind, but bitter figs, here had better be none at all. What an uncomfortable sight is this to him whose heart is set on his orchard, after the cost of so dear blood to purchase it, after such indulgent care to cherish it, and the charges of so many workmen to dress it; yea, after so much patience to expect it, say the fig-tree does not bear so soon as it is planted; in our infancy we can do nothing, in our minority we will do little, in God's service: but now it is grown fructifiable, *Jam non gustare fructus*, not to have so much as a taste! Yea, were this all, did barrenness only usurp it, but there is worse than a mere orbity or absence of goodness: a position of bitter fruits: *Quæsi vi uvas, invenio labruscas*,—I find 'wild grapes,' Isa. v. 3, luxuriant fruits. Instead of the hearty effects which wine produceth, I am answered with the melancholy prevarications of malice.

Behold the wonder and spectacle of unthankfulness: among all God's creatures, man; and among men, the barren Christian. 'Though Israel play the harlot, yet let not Judah transgress,' Hos. iv. 15. What may be expected from the wild forest of paganism, when the garden of Eden yields such fruits. The sweet fruit of the spiritual fig-tree is mercy: our God is the God of love, our Saviour is the Prince of love, the church is knit together in love; our root is love, our sap is love, our ligaments love. Now, if we shall suck the blood one of another, violate the relations of peace, concoct all our

moisture into malice, here is worse than *Invenio fructum nullum*, 'I find none : ' for *Invenio fructum malum*, I find cursed fruits. We are grown unnatural ; the hand scratcheth the eye, the mouth biteth the hand ; thorns and briars entwine and embrace one another, while (against all nature) fig-trees devour one another. 'Lord, thou didst sow good seed in thy field ; whence then hath it tares ? ' Matt. xiii. 27. Here is more fruit than God would have ; but for that he expects, 'I find none.'

When we are filled with his blessings, Christ looks for our praises ; when we have 'eaten and are fat,' that we should 'worship him,' Ps. xxii. 29. What fruit finds he ? 'We sit down to eat and drink, and rise up to play,' 1 Cor. x. 7 : for praying, playing. When we are scourged, he looks for our humiliation and penance : 'Sure in their affliction they will seek me,' Isa. xxvi. 16. What fruit finds he ? 'Lord, thou hast smitten them, but they have not sorrowed,' Jer. v. 3 ; an insensible desperateness. In this case let us pray, 'Lord, less of the fruits we have, and more of them we should have.' 'Instead of righteousness, a cry,' Isa. v. 7 : a cry indeed—a roaring cry of the oppressor, and a mourning cry of the oppressed. *Hæc non sunt placido suscipienda sinu.*

Our bells ring, our chimneys smoke, our fields rejoice, our children dance, ourselves sing and play ; *Jovis omnia plena*. But when righteousness hath sown and comes to reap, here is no harvest : *ὅχι εἶδονα*, 'I find none.' And as there was never less wisdom in Greece than in the time of the seven wise men, so never less piety among us than now, when upon good cause most is expected. When the sun is brightest, the stars be darkest : so the clearer our light, the more gloomy our life with the deeds of darkness. The Cimmerians, that live in a perpetual mist, though they deny a sun, are not condemned of impiety, but of ignorance : but Anaxagoras, that saw the sun, and yet denied it, is not condemned of ignorance, but of impiety. Former times were like Leah, blear-eyed, but fruitful : the present, like Rachel, fair, but barren. We give such acclamation to the gospel, that we quite forget to observe the law. As upon some solemn festival the bells are rung in all steeples, but then the clocks are tied up ; there is a great untuned confusion and clangour, but no man knows how the time passeth : so in this universal allowance of liberty by the gospel, which indeed rejoiceth our hearts, had we the grace of sober usage, the clocks that tell us how the time passes, truth and conscience, that shew the bounded use and decent form of things, are tied up and cannot be heard. Still, *Fructum non invenio*, 'I find no fruits.' I am sorry to pass the fig-tree in this plight : but as I find it, so I must leave it, till the Lord mend it. So I come to—

3. The sentence : 'Cut it down.' A heavy doom ! Alas ! will nothing else expiate the fault ? May not the lopping off some superfluities recover it ? Take from the sinner the object of his vicious error : deface the harlot's beauty that bewitcheth the lascivious ; pull the cup from the mouth of the drunkard ; nauseate the stomach of the riotous ; strip the popinjay of her pied feathers ; rust the gold, vanish the riches of the covetous ; take away Micah's gods, perhaps he will make him no more. If this will not do, cut off some of the arms and branches : weaken his strength ; sicken his body ; lay him groaning and bleeding on the bed of sufferance ; grieve his heart-strings with the sense and sorrow of his sins ;—anything rather than 'cut it down : ' alas ! no fruit can grow on it then but sad despair. A man's house is foul, or a little decayed ; will he pull it down, or not rather repair it ? 'There is hope of a tree, though the root wax old in the earth, and the stock die in the ground,' Job xiv. 8 ; yet the springs of water may put new

life into it : but once cut down, all hope is cut down with it. When a man hath taken delight in a tree, conveniently planted in his garden, what variety of experiments will he use before he cuts it down? Alas! thus, poor silly men, we reason : we measure things that be unmeasurable by things that be measurable, by things that be miserable. What we in a foolish pity would do, we think God in his merciful wisdom should do. Yet which of us would endure a dead tree three years together in his orchard? We would say, If it will not bear fruit to cheer us, it shall make a fire to warm us. But the Lord hath been six-and-thirty moons gracious in his forbearance ; give him now leave to be just in his vengeance. If so much indulgence cannot recover it, there is little hope of it : 'Cut it down.'

'Cut it down.' Who must do this? The dresser. An unpleasant office to him that hath bestowed so much labour upon it, esteemed it so precious, hoped for some reward at his master's hand for his diligence about it ; now to give the fatal blow to cut it down! And if it must fall, let it be *manu aliena, non sua*,—let another's hand do it. Hagar will not behold her dying son ; die he must, she was persuaded : *Modo non videam*, 'Let me not see the death of the child,' Gen. xxi. But he must obey ; *arbor non est cultoris, sed patris familias* : the tree is not the dresser's, but the Lord's ; and his own is at his own disposing : 'Cut it down.'

'Cut it down.' But how? How can the minister be said to cut down a barren soul? Some may conceive here a reference to excommunication ; whether the greater, which deprives a man of all benefit by the church's public prayers and the society of Christians ; which St Paul calls *tradere Satane*,—'to deliver unto Satan,' 1 Cor. v. : so himself excommunicated Hymenæus and Alexander, 'delivering them unto Satan,' 1 Tim. i. 20—a miserable condition, to be subjected to a slave, to a dog, a drudge ; but then especially fearful, when God grants unto Satan a writ or faculty, *pro excommunicato capiendo* : the ignominy of ignominy, besides the peril ; for as Christ protecteth all the trees in his vineyard, so if any be transplanted to the wild desert, they are under the god of this world. Or the less, which is indeed no other properly than an act of the church's discipline, whereby she corrects her unruly children, that smarting with the absence of wonted comforts, they may be humbled by repentance, and so recover their pristine state. This censure may be either too cruel or too trivial. The church of Rome grants excommunications for things lost : a man hath lost his horse, he may have an excommunication against him that detains him ;\* so the father may hap to excommunicate his own son, and for the body of a jade, hazard the soul of his child. Yea, which is worse, they publish excommunications for sins not yet committed. The lord of a manor hath set a row of young elms ; he may have an excommunication against all those that shall do them any harm. This is to hang a man before he hath done the fact that deserves it. These irritate, forceless, bugbear excommunications, the ridiculous affordments of a mercenary power, are not unlike those old night-spells which blind people had from mongrel witches, to set about their orchards and houses, antidotes and charms against thieving ; wherein distrusting the providence of God, they made themselves beholden to the devil for safety. Creditors that would be paid in their moneys may procure an excommunication against their debtors, if they pay not by such a day. This were an excellent project for your citizens, a rounder course than arrests and tedious trials at law. But it is to be doubted that your debtors would fear the Pope's parchment less than the scrivener's, and an excommunication far less

\* Approved by the Council of Trent, Sess. 26.

than an outlawry. There are but four things exempted from the power of their excommunication, as Navarrus notes—a locust, an infidel, the devil, and the Pope : so he hath matched them, so let them go together. For the excommunicate must be a man, a Christian, mortal, and an inferior ; now the locust is not a man, the infidel is not a Christian, the devil is not mortal, and the Pope hath no superior. But too much of that ; this is a parable, and here is no foundation for such a building.

‘Cut it down.’ How? with an axe of martial iron? This were an exposition fit for Douay, or the Gunpowder-engineers ; that by cutting it down understood, ‘Blow it up ;’ turning their axe to a petard. Had God said to them, ‘Cut it down,’ the axe had been instantly heaved up ; yea, they did it when God said no such thing. Rather than fail of cutting it down, they would have stocked it up, root and all : this is their mercy. But the spiritual axe is to cut down *culpas, non animas* ; when we read of cutting down, remember it is meant of men’s sins, not of their souls. Preachers indeed do wound ; but it is *gladio oris*, not *ore gladii*,—with the sword of the Spirit, not a Ravillac’s knife. If God had meant such a cutting down, Nero had been a fitter instrument than Paul. We read that ‘their sound went through the world,’ Ps. xix. ; but that their sword went through the world, we never read.

‘Cut it down.’ How then? *Succide* ; that is, *Succidendam minare*,—Threaten that I will cut it down. ‘Cast them out of my sight,’ Jer. xv. 1. *Ejice* ; that is, *Eficiendos pronuncia*.—Say that I will reject them. *Quod moritur, moriatur : quod succidendum est, succidatur*.—‘That which dieth, let it die,’ Zech. xi. 9. God sometimes sends such farewells and defiances to sinners that will not repent. ‘Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone.’ If they will not be persuaded to return, let them go on to their ruin ; let them alone. ‘If any man will be unjust, let him be unjust ; he that will be filthy, let him be filthy still,’ Rev. xxii. 11 ; let them perish. *Abeat, pereat, profundat, perdat*.

‘Cut it down.’ This was *sententia oris*,—the sentence of the mouth ; but it may be this was not *consilium cordis*,—the purpose of the heart. *Sæpe Deo minante quod peccans meretur, peccanti non fit quod Deus minatur*. Nor can this tax God of levity ; for he that speaks with condition of repentance, may change his word without suspicion of lightness. *Tu muta sententiam tuam, Deus mutabit suam*.\* Thus was Nineveh cut down : *eversa est in malo, ut ædificaretur in bono*,—the subversion was menaced, the conversion was intended. The father shuts his rebellious son out of doors, will not allow him a lodging, not so much as among his servants ; yet he does not mean to let him perish with hunger and cold in the streets : but when he hath well smarted for his disobedience, upon his humble submission he is re-entertained. The very ‘mercies of the wicked are cruel,’ but the very judgments of God are sweet. This cutting down is *medicinale*, not *mortale* ; *disciplinans, non eradicans* ; for restitution, not destitution ; for remedy, not for ruin. Indeed, if all this denunciation and threatening cannot persuade them to return, then comes their final perdition : when they have cut off themselves impenitently, God will cut them off impartially. But if we turn to deprecation and repentance, he will turn to commiseration and forgiveness. The tree is barren, and the Lord says, ‘Cut it down ;’ the tree fructifies, and he will say, ‘Let it stand.’ Oh, then, let us humble ourselves, and with seasonable repentance cut down our sins, that this terrible sentence may never cut down our souls !

\* August.



4. The reason: 'Why cumbereth it the ground?' God is an independent Lord, and needs not give a reason of his doings; for who can call him to account: *Cur ita facis?* Rom. ix. 20. His judgments are not always manifest, they are always just; nor doth he things because they are good, but they are therefore good because he doth them. Should he make short work on the earth, and despatch all barren trees in a moment; yet 'thou continuest holy, O thou worship of Israel!' If he strikes us, we are not wronged; it is our desert, and his justice. If he spares us, we have not merited; it is his mercy. *Huic fit misericordia, tibi non fit injuria*.—That man receives mercy, thou hast no injury. Yet that he might be justified, and the mouth of all wickedness stopped, he is content to give a reason of this sentence: Think not I deal hardly with this fig-tree; let us confer together, and hear one another with patience. I will shew thee sufficient reason of cutting it down: do thou shew me some cause why it should stand. My reason is, 'It cumbereth the ground.' *Terram reddit otiosam, inutilem*. It is not only barren *formaliter*, but *effectivè*. In a word: (1.) It does no good; (2.) It doth much harm.

(1.) First, it doth no good, therefore it is unworthy of the nourishment. *Terra bona* and *gens mala* are an ill match: an opulent land and a pestilential people. *Peccator non est dignus pane quo vescitur*.\*—The wicked man is not worthy of the bread he eats, of the water he drinks, of the air he breathes, of the ground he goes on. The rich thinks himself worthy of delicate viands, costly garments, dutiful attendance, *quia dives*, because he is rich; yet he may not be worthy of a crumb, a rag, a respect, *quia malus*, because he is evil. It will one day grieve such fruitless Nabals, when they must receive a multiplicity of torments, according to the number of their abused benefits; and they will wish that they had not fared so well upon earth, that they might fare less ill in hell. They live in the vineyard, eat the fat, and drink the sweet; turning all this juice, not into fruitful clusters, for the behoof of God's servants, but into their own arms and branches: raising their houses out of the ruins of God's house, What good do they? Cut them down; 'why cumber they the ground?' It is fit that the 'riches of the sinner should be laid up for the righteous,' Eccles. ii. 26: *dentur dignioribus*.

But if God should at once cut down all the barren trees among us, there never was such a cry in Egypt as there would be about London. What innumerable swarms of nothing-does beleaguer this city! Men and women, whose whole employment is to go from their beds to the tap-house, then to the playhouse, where they make a match for the brothel-house, and from thence to bed again. To omit those ambulatory Christians, that wear out the pavement of this great temple with their feet, but scarce ever touch the stones of it with their knees; that are never further from God than when they are nearest the church. To omit that rabble of begging and pilfering vagabonds, that like beasts know no other end of their creation but recreation, but to eat, and drink, and sleep. What an army of these might be mustered out of our suburbs, but that idleness hath disabled them to any service; they are neither fit for God nor man. Did they yet but, like worms and insects, spend up the corruption of the land, and leave us the less, it were somewhat. But they are worse, even diseases and unwholesome airs, to breed infection among us. Let authority look to their castigation, or answer for their mischiefs: so far as they deserve, let them not be spared; cut them down, why cumber they the ground?

\* August.

(2.) The barren tree doth no good you see ; but that is not all—it doth much hurt, and that in two respects :—

[1.] It occupies the room where a better tree might grow. The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, ‘and given to a nation that will bring forth the fruits thereof,’ Matt. xxi. 43. A fruitful nation would be content with such a dwelling. Christ foretells this mutation, Paul shews it accomplished. ‘They are broken off, that we’—in their places—‘might be grafted on,’ Rom. xi. 19. ‘Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment?’ Matt. xxii. 12. Why dost thou usurp the seat where a worthy guest might sit? Thus David used to purge his court, admitting the righteous into the offices of the unrighteous, Ps. ci. 8. As in case of calamity, the godly are delivered out of trouble, and the wicked comes in his room : so in case of felicity, the ungodly shall be turned out of their happiness, and the righteous shall come in their stead.

A judge is corrupt ; he is girded with justice, but the girdle sags to that side where the purse hangeth : God will cut him down ; here is room for a good man that will do equity. A magistrate is partial, and draws the sword of justice in his own quarrel, which he puts up in the cause of Christ : he must be cut down, here is room for one that will love and adhere to the truth. An office is abused by him that holds it ; he bought dear and cannot sell cheap : it is time he were cut down ; this place will maintain a man that will maintain the place with uprightness. A minister is barren, hath no milk in his breasts ; *ministerium ejus accipiat alter* : Acts i. 20, let another take his office ; here is room for one that will feed the people. A profane patron will let none into the Lord’s vineyard but at the *non-licet* gate, by which good men will never enter ; his clerk shall be *Simon*, himself will be *Magus* : vengeance shall cut him down ; here is room for one that will freely put faithful labourers into the vineyard. There grows an oppressor, skulking in a corner ; the needy cannot find him, or if they do, they find no fruit from him : cut him down ; here is room for one that will pity the poor. The Lord will root out such bastard plants, and replenish his garden with fruitful trees.

[2.] It draws away nourishment from better plants that would bear us fruits. For this Christ denounceth a woe to those Jewish clerks, that keeping the keys of heaven, would ‘neither enter themselves nor suffer others,’ Matt. xxiii. 13. What shall become of them that will neither do good nor suffer good to be done, but cutting down? A great oak pines all the under-wood near it, yea, spoils the grass that should feed the cattle. A great oppressor engrosseth all round about him, till there be no place left for a fertile tree, Isa. v. 8. Meanwhile, himself hath only some leaves, to shadow his sycophants ; but no fruit, unless bramble-berries, and such as the hogs will scarce eat.

All covet to be great trees, few to be good. The briar would grow up to the bigness of the maple, the maple would be as tall as the cedar, the cedar as strong as the oak ; and these so spread their roots till they starve the rest by an insensible soaking. When mother earth, the church, would derive her sap to some young hopeful plant, these intercept it. There is maintenance due to the minister, but the barren impropiator stands in his way and sucks it all from him : perhaps he leaves him some few drops to cool his temples, but not enough to preserve life.

But the famished tree cries against him that draws the life from it, and yields no fruit ; and God will hear it : *Abscinde*, Cut it down. How charitable would Lazarus have been, had he been owner of Dives’s estate ! How

would Mordecai have promoted the good of Israel, had he been as great a favourite as Haman was! How freely would the conscionable man give spiritual preferments, were he a patron! He that fears God would justly render the church her dues, did he drive such trades and dwell in such houses as you do. But that God, who disposeth all as it pleaseth him, mend all when it pleaseth him, even for his own mercies' sake!

Thus from a plain text I have derived you familiar persuasions; for I came not hither to satisfy the curious head, but the honest heart. Admit but two considerations more, and I have done:—

*Consideration 1.*—The Lord hath shewed us the way to be fruitful by his own example. He owes us nothing: if he withhold good things, we cannot challenge him; if he sends us good things, we are bound to thank him. The last year, how general was the complaint all over this kingdom! The mower could not fill his scythe, nor the binder-up of sheaves his bosom; the beasts perished for want of fodder; yea, children died in the street with hunger, the poor father not being able with all his week's labour to buy them only bread. The fields were thin, and the barns thinner; little in many places there was to gather, and the unseasonable weather prevented the gathering of that little. The emptiness of their bowels did justly fill our bowels with compassion. Famine is a sore plague. We then cried unto the Lord for fruits, and he heard us. Lo, in how plentiful a harvest he hath answered our desires, to his own praise, and our comfort! Yea, he concluded all with songs and triumphs, a joyful harvest-home: the best sheaf of our wheat, the best grape of the vintage, the best flower of our garland, the best fruit of that royal tree, the safe return of our gracious prince. These be the fruits of his mercy to us; where be the fruits of our thankfulness to him?

*Consideration 2.*—The barren fig-tree is of all most miserable; and so much the more as it is barren in the vineyard. The vine fruitless is of all trees most useless, Ezek. xv. 3. It is compared to noble and worthy things: to the good woman, *Uxor tua sicut vitis*, Ps. cxxviii. 3; to the best man, 'I am the true vine,' John xv. 1; it cheers the heart of God and man, Judg. ix. 13. But if barren, it is good for nothing; not so much as to make a pin to hang a hat on. Oaks and cedars are good for building, poplars for pales, very bushes for hedging, doted wood for firing; but the fruitless vine is good for nothing. Salt keeps other things from putrefying; but if itself be putrefied, what shall season it? Matt. v. 13. A sweet singer delights us all; but *quis medebitur cantatori à serpente percusso*?—if a serpent hath stung him, who shall recover his voice? If the eye be blind, what shall look to the eye?

*Ad nihilum valet, quod non valet ad finem suum.*—It is good for nothing that is not good for the end it was made. If a knife be not good to cut, we say it is good for nothing; yet may some other use be invented for it. If a plough be not good to break the ground, we say it is good for nothing; yet it may stop a gap. If a hound be not good to hunt, we say he is good for nothing; yet may he in the night give warning of a thief. But if a fig-tree, a professor, be not good for fruit, he is indeed good for nothing. The refuse of other things have their uses: sour wine will make vinegar, old rags make paper, lees are for dyers, soil is good to fat the land, potsherds and broken tiles to mend highways; all good for somewhat: yea, they offer to sell the combings of their hairs,—ladies and gentlewomen know whether they be good for any purpose or no. But the fruitless vine, the savourless salt, the lightless lamp, the figless fig-tree, the graceless Christian, is good for nothing.

We all have our stations in the vineyard, to bring forth fruits; but what be those fruits? It was a smart invention of him, that having placed the emperor and the Pope, reconciled, in their majestic thrones, he brought the states of the world before them. First comes a councillor of state, with this motto, 'I advise you two;' then a courtier, 'I flatter you three;' then a husbandman, 'I feed you four;' then a merchant, 'I cozen you five;' then a lawyer, 'I rob you six;' then a soldier, 'I fight for you seven;' then a physician, 'I kill you eight;' lastly, a priest, 'I absolve you all nine.' This was his satire. But in the fear of God, as our sovereign doth govern us in truth and peace, so let the councillor advise, the judge censure, the husbandman labour, the merchant traffic, the lawyer plead, the soldier bear arms, the divine preach—all bring forth the fruits of righteousness; that this kingdom may flourish, and be an exemplary encouragement to our neighbours; that our children may be blessed after us, our enemies convinced, aliens converted, Satan confounded, the gospel honoured, the Lord glorified, and our own souls eternally saved. Which grace, the happy fruit of the gospel, and glory, the happy fruit of grace, God the Father grant us all for his mercies' sake, God the Son for his merits' sake, God the Holy Ghost for his name's sake; to whom, three Persons, and one most glorious God, be rendered all honour and obedience, now and for ever! Amen.

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#### TO THE READER.

I neither affect those rheumatic pens that are still dropping upon the press, nor those phlegmatic spirits that will scarce be conjured into the orb of employment; but if modest forwardness be a fault, I cannot excuse myself.

It pleased God Almighty to make a fearful comment on this, his own text, the very same day it was preached by his unworthiest servant.\* The argument was but audible in the morning, before night it was visible. His holy pen had long since written with ink; now his hand of justice expounded it in the characters of blood. There was only a conditional menace, 'So it shall be;' here a terrible remonstrance, 'So it is.' Sure, he did not mean it for a nine-days' wonder! Their sudden departure out of the world must not so suddenly depart from the memory of the world. Woe to that soul that shall take so slight a notice of so extraordinary a judgment! We do not say, They perished; charity forbid it! But this we say, It is a sign of God's favour, when he gives a man law. We pass no sentence upon them; yet let us take warning by them. The remarkableness would not be neglected; for the time, the place, the persons, the number, the manner. Yet still we conclude not this was for the transgression of the dead; but this we are sure of, it is meant for the admonition of the living.

Such is our blessed Saviour's conclusion upon a parallel instance: 'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.' There is no place safe enough for offenders: but when the Lord is once up in arms, happy man that can make his own peace! otherwise, in vain we hope to run from the plague, while we carry the sin along with us. Yet will not our wilful and bewitched recusants, from these legible characters, spell God's plain meaning. No impression can be made in those hearts that are ordained to perish. For their malicious, causeless, and unchristian censures of us, God forgive them: our requital be only pity and prayers for them. Howsoever thy give out—and I will not here examine—that their pity is more than ours, impudence itself cannot deny but our charity is greater than theirs. Now the holy fear of God keep us in the ways of faith and obedience, that the properation of death may never prevent our preparation to die! And yet still, after our best endeavour, 'from sudden death, good Lord, deliver us all!' Amen.

T. A.

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\* This sermon was preached the same day that the house fell down upon the Papists in the Blackfriars, London, October 26, 1623.