

When I was younger I would help out at Christian camps a lot. Mainly doing children's work. I don't really remember much of them now but there is this one time that's etched in my memory

I was about 15.... We were in a tent with about 45 kids and I was responsible for a team of about 15 of them. We had been teaching them a memory verse- John 15:5. I am the vine and you are the branches, if you remain in me and I remain in you, you will produce fruit. '

We'd broken the verse into 3 bits and got the children to say them one team after the other. My group had to say 'you will produce fruit'. We did it through a couple of times and it worked really well but the last time one of the kids didn't stop. He started to chant- 'you will produce fruit' another child joined in and then another, then my whole team of 15 children were chanting at the top of their voices, 'you will produce fruit.' I was panicking- I'd lost control- did I stop them saying the Bible verse- were they being moved by the spirit or just being naughty??

The other leaders were looking at me- some of the other children found it funny and joined in too. Quickly 45 children in a tent were screaming 'You will produce fruit' over and over again while the leaders looked on helplessly at what must have been the most well behaved riot anyone had ever seen. We couldn't get them to stop- I remember thinking that we might have broken them or they'd perhaps gone into a trance from the heat and mindless repeating of the words. It was a bit scary actually- it became a demand 'You shall produce fruit!' we had to wait the kids out and eventually they ran out of steam.... and the next day we didn't do the memory verse.

When I read the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13 the first thing I thought of was 45 children screaming in unison 'YOU SHALL PRODUCE FRUIT'

The story goes that a land owner has a fig tree growing in his garden, it hadn't produced any figs for 3 years, so the land owner speaks to his gardener and says dig it up- don't let it waste the soil. And the gardener asks his boss for one more year. He says he'll take special care of the fig tree, and if it still doesn't produce fruit after a year he'll cut it down.

I was going to talk about something else- but then the last week happened and suddenly this reading meant something very different to me.

I was looking at urban hope, and the stories I had come across that week- there was a girl who's boyfriend had dragged her down the stairs by her hair, and the girl who found cigarette burns on her nephew when he came to visit, and the boy who was murdered around the corner and all the pain that was carried with that.

I heard stories of cycles of abuse and of brokenness, young people not able to do better with hand they been dealt. This week it has been relentless.

I found myself crying and praying and saying to God- what on earth are we doing, where is the light here? Where is the hope here? What's the point- let's pack it up and go home. Let's dig it up

And the gardener says give it one more year, and 45 children scream 'YOU SHALL PRODUCE FRUIT'

I've always assumed in this story that we were the tree, and God was the land owner and Jesus was the Gardner, petitioning on our behalf to a weary God to give us more time in his mercy and grace, to grow and to produce.

But this week I have stood with the land owner looking at my life and my ministry and wondering where the fruit was, I have seen death and destruction and wondered where love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control were sown. Where is the fruit?

And Jesus has said to me, said to us, give it one more year- I'll take care of it and it will produce fruit.

I am not the gardener- I do not have the ability to provide fertilizer, I don't know where to dig- I can't make things grow- I don't know what's dead and what's alive. BUT I have confidence in the gardener. There will be fruit. And I thank God that he will give us more time.

There has been fruit this week, I have seen peace grow in the lighting of candles, I have see love in the sharing of stories, I have seen joy in the resolution of problems, I have seen people be faithful and gentle, I have seen so so much kindness- there has been much fruit. The gardener has been at work causing things to grow where things may have appeared to be dead.

Today this parable calls me and perhaps all of us, to not give up- to not let that which God has planted in us be dug up, to trust that as we remain in God he will remain in us- and that we will produce fruit.

Amen