

WEEK 1: WEDNESDAY

One of the great lies of our time is to suppose that because Jesus brings forgiveness, and urges us to be forgiving people, meek and gentle, there is no sharp edge to his message. To hear some people, you'd think the whole of the Christian message was simply a call to accept one another, never to judge another person. Indeed, doesn't Jesus himself tell us not to judge, at the start of this very chapter (7.1)? That verse is quoted again and again by people who would do well to ponder this present passage.

Jesus is quite clear that there are such persons as false prophets, as people who appear to be his followers but who in fact have never known him. Life would be a lot simpler if we could tell at a glance who the true and the false prophets were, but the only guide Jesus offers is the picture of the tree. Sooner or later — and it may be a lot later, or it may happen quite suddenly — the fruit of someone's life will appear, and then you can tell whether they were real or whether they were fooling themselves and others.

In Jesus' own day there was no shortage of such people. Jesus spoke more than once about people who would turn up and declare that they were prophesying in his name, or in God's name, and would lead people astray. The second and third generation of the church faced the same problem, and developed an interesting rule of thumb: if someone arrives claiming to be a prophet, but asking for money, they are false. We might expand that into the usual trio: money is so often linked with sex and power. Some false teachers offer their followers sexual licence in contrast to Jesus' rigorous standard, as in 5.27—30, 15.19—20 and 19.3—12; part of the lie, today, is that Jesus didn't mind about such things. Others are eager for personal power, as you can tell when someone challenges them. And, yes, some today are in it for the money.

When Jesus uses the image of the tree, he is drawing, as so often, on an ancient biblical picture. The first Psalm speaks of God's true people like trees planted by streams of water, which will produce fruit at the right time, while the wicked are like chaff blown around by the wind. Jeremiah develops this picture (17.8), thinking of the tree that sends out its roots to look for the water it needs. Lent is a time when we should be doing that: sending out our roots to look for the water of life. The challenge of these verses isn't simply one of learning to recognize true Christian teaching from false. The challenge is to become, ourselves, trees that bear good fruit, people who not only say 'Lord, Lord' when it suits us, but who apply ourselves to the much harder task of discerning and doing God's will.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, draw our roots to yourself, the living water, so that we may grow strong and bear good fruit.