

The Tenants in the Vineyard (Luke 20: 9 – 18)

Sunday Evening 26th July

Jesus told parables that can unlock the mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions: how to live in community, how to determine what ultimately matters and how to live the life God wants us to live.

Parables are Jesus' way of teaching us that continue to challenge, provoke and inspire.

Jesus knew that the best teaching concerning how to live was not from spoon fed data but from narratives that remind us of what we already know, but are sometimes resistant to recall. Parables are not answers but invitations that can open up new ways of reading and thinking and living.

When Jesus told the parable of the tenants in the vineyard he was speaking to the religious authorities of the day: the teachers of the law and the chief priests. He was speaking into a certain situation. Jesus was warning them that they were like the evil tenants who beat up the prophets and killed the son of the owner. Jesus pointed out that they had not recognised the way of God and He foretold his own situation by quoting psalm 118 (v22) 'the stone the builders rejected which will become the cap stone'.

So I have a few questions here for us to reflect on:

First of all what is shocking about this parable?

This is a violent parable. At harvest time the landowner sent the first servant to collect some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty handed. The second servant was also beaten and sent away but this time Luke the gospel writer includes the detail that he was treated shamefully. The treatment of each prophet and then of Jesus gets progressively worse. The third servant was then wounded and thrown out. Then when they are faced with the heir they decide to kill him so that the inheritance will be theirs. They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

This was shocking to the first hearers of it, partly because He was speaking about them.

Then Jesus's final words in verse 18: Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed. These are violent words. This is a condemnatory parable which silences the authorities but then they plan their attack.

First of all I want to say that God thankfully doesn't play by our rules.

Jesus' final words may be puzzling but the stone that was rejected has become the capstone. A new type of temple was created, we are the Church, and Jesus is a chief feature of us. The religious rejected Jesus but He was vindicated and now the new Church is built, Jesus is the capstone and the new way is one of love and peace.

God is loving and merciful and I am sure more merciful than any of us can truly imagine. Thankfully God doesn't play by our rules.

It is also hard to hear a parable about violence so close to the death of young Stefan Appleton who was murdered recently in an unprovoked knife attack, whose funeral was this week, on Wednesday.

When we come to church we want to hear a message of love and peace and forgiveness and of seeking a new way. However sometimes we come to church with questions that have no easy answers or we come to Church with expectations and find we are disappointed.

Jesus is the new temple. He died once for all on the cross. He is the capstone for us but the violence in this parable still leaves a bitter taste and I think it is right that we should feel disturbed by it as we think about ways in which we might need to be challenged.

So the next question – who or what are we in this parable?

The vineyard in the parable is a metaphor for Israel, the nation of Israel. The owner of the vineyard is God; the servants are the prophets that God sent and who were beaten. And the tenants were the religious authorities of the day, the men who God had been entrusted with spiritual leadership. However they violently rejected the prophets, practised injustice and finally crucified the rightful heir.

When I read a condemnatory parable I find at first reading I place myself in the character of the victim and project the baddies in the story onto others. But I think it is all too easy to paint a black picture of someone or something but the reality is that most of us are both sinners and saints – the most interesting ones amongst us will be both sinners and saints in abundance! It's not just other people that need to be challenged it's also ourselves.

I think it would be really helpful for us *not* to place ourselves in the role of the landowner or the heir. God is the true owner and Jesus the heir. I'm sure that none of us here have messiah complexes but really sometimes it's good to check ourselves. We are not God or the Messiah – just thought I should say that, just in case. We are the tenants and the servants. There are different roles that people adopt and take on in life but first and foremost we need to honour and respect each other as people, equal before God and I think that is the place where we should always start from.

What is this parable urging us to contemplate?

So in a few minutes I will be asking you to think about how this parable challenges us. There are three questions I hope we will consider.

How does this parable challenge:

- Church
- World and society
- St Stephen's community and us as individuals

(The Church, world and us) I have a few thoughts and questions which can start us off. Have a listen and allow the ones that resonate, stay with you. They are rhetorical questions to get us thinking.

What happens when Jesus' followers go to places of power and injustice? What can we expect?

Do we build Church or do we build empires?

Is a sense of ownership in Church always a good thing?

What happens when people use Christianity or religion to reinforce their own security instead of shining God's light into the world?

What happens when we don't offer peace and love?

Are knives and guns the only deadly weapons in our community?

Why do suicide bombers think they will receive glory by killing others?

What about those for whom the church is one big exclusion zone – danger – do not enter. Who are the people that don't feel welcome in the Church?

What happens when we invite people in, and then decide they don't fit and start to exclude them?

Do we really listen to people or do we make quick judgments and fail to be challenged?

Let's go back to scripture. In researching the talk for this evening I discovered Isaiah 5: 1 – 7: The song of the vineyard:

5 I will sing for the one I love

a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard

on a fertile hillside.

²He dug it up and cleared it of stones

and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it

and cut out a winepress as well.

Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,

but it yielded only bad fruit.

³“Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,

judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴What more could have been done for my vineyard

than I have done for it?

When I looked for good grapes,

why did it yield only bad?

⁵Now I will tell you

what I am going to do to my vineyard:

I will take away its hedge,

and it will be destroyed;

I will break down its wall,

and it will be trampled.

⁶I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.”

⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Today was the day when St James's, Piccadilly held its patronal festival and remembered St James's the apostle. The saints' day was actually yesterday. Anyway, James the apostle witnessed Jesus's transfiguration and is traditionally believed to be the first of the twelve apostles martyred (by Herod as recorded in Acts). Martyrs are known for dying for their faith but there is another meaning to the word martyr which is *witness*. Bearing witness was not intended to lead to death; true martyrs do not inflict death on others nor seek it for themselves. Their main objective was to witness faithfully to their faith; through rejection and violence the blood of the martyrs became the seed on which the Church was built. Jesus death was a decisive victory, it is the God who has the last word, and death is not the end because... love is. Amen