

Sunday 8 October 2023
Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 5: 1-7
NT: Philippians 3: 4b-14
Gp: Matthew 21: 33-end

All imaginative writing, secular and sacred, uses symbols and imagery to describe the beauty and the pain of human experience. In biblical writing the portrayal of the chosen people as the vineyard of the Lord was a familiar prophetic image, and we have an example of that in today's first reading, Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard". The prophetic image of the chosen people of God which Jesus uses to such effect in the Gospel of Matthew.

Our Gospel reading today, about vineyards and cornerstones, tells of yet another encounter that Jesus had with some of the religious leaders of the day. This time it was chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus clearly had an axe to grind with them. He never had an easy relationship with what we might call 'organised religion' since the time he got thrown out of the synagogue in Nazareth.

The religious establishment in their turn seemed determined, as they saw it, to show Jesus as an upstart, a rebel, who was not going to be allowed to rock the boat of established religious hierarchy. They paid close attention to what Jesus was saying when crowds gathered to hear him speak. They continually sought to challenge him and put him in his place. But every time such encounters took place, Jesus was coming out on top, and that just should not be!

Jesus tells a story about Israel and God using the familiar image of a vineyard. But Jesus' version leaves his listeners feeling uncomfortable. In Isaiah 5.1-7, the prophet focuses on Israel's failure to be God's vineyard. The failure is evident because Israel is not the place of justice and righteousness, but has become a place of self-interest. Isaiah gives this message by means of a parable about a vineyard, its owner and its tenants.

In ancient Israel, a vineyard was a traditional metaphor for the bride. At a wedding feast, as part of the celebration when the bride is presented to the groom, a song extolling the virtues of the bride would be sung. But in Isaiah's story, the song takes an unexpected turn.

The vineyard represents Israel as the bride, the ground is prepared, and the vineyard planted with the best stock, as expected. But the result is not as expected, the vineyard disappoints, the grapes are sour. So, what is to be done? The vineyard is abandoned to

return to the wild, rejected for its failure. The story is therefore an analogy of Israel's relationship with God, and her failure to bear the fruits evident in righteousness and justice.

This theme is continued in the parable related in our gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus references both Isaiah and Daniel. This is the second of three parables that Jesus tells in the presence of Jewish leaders, the chief priests and elders of the people, in his final week in Jerusalem. They started off by questioning his authority and now Jesus is teaching them in parables.

Jesus begins his parable: 'There was a landowner who planted a vineyard' (v.33). Some Bible commentators suggest that Matthew is simply following Mark, but the key connection that Matthew's audience would have made is with Isaiah 5.1-7. They know the vineyard tradition. They know what Isaiah did with it. They probably feel comfortable that they know where Jesus is going with his parable. That he is, in effect, telling them of a dark event of the past, one that everyone knows about, but he is going to end by telling them, 'but it's all right, things are different now'.

Except, Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, the ending in which the tenants are driven out and new tenants brought in is deeply disturbing: more disturbing than Isaiah's changed ending was in his day. Jesus's parable is a tale of violence and murder, and arguably contributed to his own death (by its effect on those who first heard it). Such stories are dangerous.

The goodness and provision of both Isaiah 5 and Matthew 21 stand in stark contrast with the creeping resistance of the tenants when harvest-time comes and the rent must be paid. Matthew's use of the phrase, 'the time of the harvest had come' reminds us that we must understand this parable in the light of the coming kingdom of God. The harvest is the time when the blessings of God's abundance are received. They are given to be used and enjoyed (1 Tim 6:17). But the harvest is also the time to acknowledge that God is the giver and owner of these rich gifts.

The hard message of this parable is that grace, calling and gift are not incompatible with judgement. The parable of the wicked tenants can serve as an outline of Matthew's understanding of the life of Israel. God called Israel to be God's vineyard: fenced by law, grounded in the land and protected by worship of God in the temple. God sent prophets to call the people to faithfulness but the people beat, stoned and killed them. Finally, God sent his own child, but the people even rejected him.

Matthew hints throughout his gospel that the Gentiles often understood Jesus better than his own people, the Jews, that even though the Gentiles were a people who were outside

the Jewish community, the promises that Jesus came to bear are for them and for all people. And even at the end of Matthew's gospel, what does Jesus say? For the disciples to go out into all nations, all of them.

Jesus reminds us in this parable, God doesn't play by those same rules that we do. The kingdom is not ours and it's not up to us to decide who is in or who is out. The kingdom belongs to God and God decides, ultimately, who is "in," and it might not be who we expect. In a world where there is so much "in" and "out," isn't it good news that we do not have the power to decide?

As with so many of Jesus' parables, we also hear a word of grace in this text. After Jesus describes the violent way the tenant farmers treated the servants and finally the landowner's own son, he asks them how the landowner will treat the tenant farmers. Thoroughly entrenched in the world's ideology of violence and retribution, the Pharisees say that the landowner will bring "those wretches to a wretched end." Jesus knows this is not quite the whole story.

He invokes Psalm 118, an ancient and sacred text of the hearers of this parable: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." And what about this landowner? He acts like a desperate parent willing to do anything for his children. First, he sends servants, and they're beaten, stoned, killed. Then he sends more servants, and the same thing happens again. Then he decides to send his son, his heir, along, to deal with these bloodthirsty hooligans? It's totally crazy. Who would do such a thing? No one. Except maybe a landlord who is so desperate to be in a relationship with these tenants that he will do anything, risk anything, even send his beloved child to reach out to them.

The landlord is willing to do or try anything to reach out to the tenants, acting more like a parent than a businessman. Who would keep sending servant after servant, when one after another they come back bruised, broken or not at all? Who? Only someone with unquenchable hope and unthinkable mercy.

Paul in the epistle, uses his own life story to make a point about his own changing relationship with God. In the past, Paul was confident that his hard-line Hebrew identity was the true mark of his special relationship with God. But now, in the present (v.7-11), his experience of Jesus has changed his self understanding in relation to God. The result is that he sees a whole new future that is about trusting God for what lies ahead and being himself, always, a work in progress. In all three readings, the challenge posed is to see ourselves as we really are – that means, as God sees us – and not be fooled by who we think we are, or by our own desires.

Paul gives us an encouraging, challenging and inspirational example of the type of faithful commitment to Christ's way that is a fitting response to God's amazing love shown to us in, and through, the Father's love, the Son's sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit's persistence in bringing home to us the loving forgiveness and life giving power of God's love shown to us through Jesus Christ. And so if the 'what?' of the sermon this morning is an exposure of our faithlessness and God's faithfulness, what is the 'so what?' What is the sharp end and edge? What are we to do in response – Lament? Repent? Return? Consider what tending and taking care of God's vineyard (Kingdom purposes) might look like where we live, love, and are beloved.

God's two greatest commandments and summary of the 'Law and the prophets' are: "Love God with your all, and your neighbour as yourself." Each one of us can think of down-to-earth examples where we are of what obedience to these commands will look like, and what it means to grow up into our baptism in Christ and press on towards the 'goal for which God has called us heavenwards in Christ Jesus'?

Fr Bill Addy