

Sunday 4 October 2026
The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 5:1-7
NT: Philippians 3:4b-14
Gp: Matthew 21:33-46

I don't know if any of you have ever had trouble paying the rent or mortgage. It's a horrible feeling: the anxiety and insecurity. The pain of it was brought home by the recent case of Maricarmen Abascal. This is an 87-year-old woman residing in central Madrid. She lived in a flat that her father had begun to rent since 1956. The rent was capped, and she continued there as a tenant after her parents had died.

A few years ago, however, the flat was bought by a company, and that company found a legal workaround which allowed them to raise the rent. And so they did: from 500 euros to over 2600 euros – a fivefold increase. They relented a bit and reduced the rent to 1650 euros, but this was still hundreds more than Maricarmen's entire pension.

Legally, the position was clear. Maricarmen could not pay the rent, and the eviction order was given. And so we had the sight of an 87-year-old woman literally being carried out of her home on a stretcher to get rid of her.

If you've followed the news, you will have seen the enormous protests that followed, the government's attempts to change the law to stop this happening – and the shamefaced company allowing Maricarmen to return to the flat.

The story reveals a lot about Spain's property crisis but also shines a light on wider issues of ownership and power. For many, the image of Maricarmen on a stretcher summed up the cruelty of it all – even though the company was acting quite legally. Why dwell on this story today? Because I think it sheds a different light on the parable we just heard.

In that parable, we hear of a landowner, who leaves his vineyard in the hands of tenants. At harvest, he sends slaves to take the produce, but they are killed. Eventually, he sends his son, who is also killed.

We naturally read this as if the landowner stands for God. God sends his prophets, but they are rejected and persecuted. Then he sends his Son Jesus, and even he is killed. So, God punishes his people and strips them of what they had been given. The explanation added on to the parable seems to back this up: 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who produce the fruits of the kingdom.'

But there are some things about the story that should give us pause before we accept this explanation.

First off, absentee landowners would be viewed negatively by Jesus' audience. It's certainly true that Jesus can challenge his listeners by making unscrupulous characters into the anti-heroes of his stories – but he does not whitewash them. An absentee landlord who goes to another country is rich, privileged and either in league with the Roman colonisers or one of them. The landowner is an oppressor – and, let's not forget, a slaveowner – who is exploiting the land and its people for gain.

The second reason to hesitate before we equate the landowner with God is this: the landowner's response to the tenant's violence is *more* violence. The death of the son does not change the situation or usher in forgiveness. Instead, the tenants are all put to death. Might, not love, wins the day.

Sadly, too, this is a story which has been used against the Jewish people. It has been taken to mean that the Jews have been rejected and the Gentile Church has inherited the promises of God. But this is completely at odds with God's nature. Do we really think God breaks covenant with his people? That God acts out of petty vengeance? I hope not. For the sake of better Christian-Jewish relations, such an interpretation has thankfully been rejected across many mainstream churches.

The story is usually known as the parable of the wicked tenants, and it is quite true that they behave in a murderous way. But the landowner, for all their initial patience, doesn't come out of the story too well either. Neither side is the hero, because all of them are caught up in this cycle of violence and more violence, resentment and revenge.

Let's consider an alternative reading: that this parable is told to expose the alienation and violence built into the world, built into its structures of power and even into its laws. These are systems that pit us against one another. The image of Maricarmen being forced from her home on a stretcher was a kind of parable itself: it too exposed the cruelty of that world, gave a human face to a faceless system.

No doubt there were relatively good landowners. There can be good and considerate landlords. But individual goodness is not enough, if the systems that shape us are built on the backs of the poor and vulnerable.

The words of Jesus placed after this parable suggest another way: the stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone. Throughout this part of the gospel, Jesus is in dispute with the religious authorities. He will be killed with their collusion, at the hands of imperial occupiers who use cruel humiliation as a way of keeping order.

But he will not respond with the sword. There will be no army of angels to destroy his enemies. He will not pitch his flag, claim a territory, dominate the weak.

Instead, he offers something new. A life freely offered, a knowledge that we are loved without condition, a forgiveness that is bigger and stronger than vengeance could ever be. That is grace, the free gift of love. It speaks to every one of us as individuals. The gift is to know we, with all our flaws, are loved in our uniqueness. We are known by named and called to share in God's work of love.

But it also speaks to us *collectively*. In our relationship, our politics, our business, our laws, the way we distribute power and wealth. All the things that shape us. It is a love that can make us members one of another, not rivals scrapping for the same piece of earth.

I was heartened that so many reacted with outrage to the images of Maricarmen being carted from her home. But many other such stories go unheard and unseen. As ministers of Christ, one of our jobs is to shine a light on our world, so that no one gets crushed in a dark forgotten corner. In this sense, we are all priests, offering the gospel of grace to a world that needs it.

The eucharist brings this offering into the present moment. We share the Last Supper. We stand at the foot of the cross. We meet the risen Christ. Through death and new birth, we get a new start. And we are fed with bread and wine with no price attached, save that our hearts are claimed for love. This is our law. This is our home. And it is big enough for all.

Fr Steven Shakespeare