



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*4th October 2020
17th Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

Today's gospel is the second consecutive parable Jesus told rebuking the Jewish religious leaders. Most of the parables that Jesus told made one main point but this one is a little more complex. This parable exposed the planned attempt on the life of Jesus and God's judgement on the planners but even more important for me, this parable reveals that as a consequence of the disobedience of the Jewish people and their leaders, the nation of Israel is no longer the kingdom of God and as stewards entrusted with the leadership of God's kingdom the religious leaders will be replaced. But before you relax to hear how Jesus lambasted the religious leaders of his day, as with all of the parables that Jesus told, there are lessons here for us today. Jesus' message was not only for the religious leaders of that day and other Jews who shared the same views as their religious leaders, but also for the religious leaders of today and not only the religious leaders but all who are members of God's kingdom today.

So, fasten your seat belts as we look at this parable which appears in each of the first three gospels, albeit with slight variations. At the outset, I have to say that I love these vineyard parables for, being surrounded by vineyards as we are here in the Luberon, we have absolutely no excuse for not understanding what is going on.

The parable fits the situation in Jewish Galilee in the first century. Large estates owned by absentee landowners were put in the hands of local peasants who cultivated the land as tenant farmers. In accordance with a kind of sharecropping agreement, a fixed amount was due to the landowner. At the proper time the landowner would expect to receive his share. The same arrangement as we have today. We learn that a landowner built a vineyard. His name could have been Ridley Scott who is busy planting vines and building a winery not one kilometre away from where I am speaking. The winepress and vat in the parable Jesus told were constructed such that the grape juice would flow to the lowest point. Walls were often built around vineyards to keep out animals and thieves. A watch tower served as a lookout to guard against fire and thieves especially as the grapes ripened. During the first century, the landowners were most often Roman, which did not sit well with Galilean Jews; another similarity between Ridley Scott and the locals here. The landowner went away and after the harvest he sent his servants to collect what was owed to him. The tenants were none too happy to see the owner's servants. They beat one, stoned one and killed another. The landowner was not deterred and sent a second group of servants who were treated the same way as the first group. As a last resort, the landowner sent his son believing that the tenants would have some respect for him and give his son what he was entitled to. This was not a good move as the tenants saw an opportunity to not only keep that year's harvest but inherit the vineyard as Jewish law provided that a piece of property, unclaimed by an heir, would be declared "ownerless" and could be claimed by anyone. Jesus then asked His listeners what they thought the landowner's response might be. The listeners answered swiftly and emphatically saying, "the landowner will go and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others who will pay him his due". At this point Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, a psalm very familiar to the listeners as we believe it was sung at Passover both in the temple when the sacrificial lambs were offered, and later at home over the Passover meal. The religious leaders and other listeners get the full meaning of the parable. It is about them, what they will do to Jesus and the consequences.

If you have not understood already, I need to identify who is who and what is what in this parable. The vineyard is the metaphorical element standing for the kingdom of God, the landowner is God, the tenants are Jewish religious leaders, the servants are the prophets and the landowner's son is Jesus himself.

Let us start with the vineyard. The vine is mentioned more than any other plant in the Bible. The grape vine was important culturally and economically in biblical times just as it is with us here in this region today. Because of its centrality to everyday life, it is often used symbolically in Scripture. We have heard two OT examples today in the classic verses from Isaiah and today's Psalm. In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet uses the allegory of Yahweh's vineyard which he reveals as none other than the house of Israel, the people of Judah. This reference of Israel as a vine was a comparison that was readily accepted by the Israelites who knew the blessings of the beauty, shade, fruit, and the wine the grapevine provided. A fruitful vine was a symbol of obedient Israel, while wild grapes or an empty vine spoke of Israel's disobedience. Unfortunately, the comparison was often negative because Israel did not always demonstrate the good qualities of the vine. For Ezekiel, too, because of Israel's sin, the image of the vine was seen as an illustration of Israel's uselessness. The wood of the vine is useless for building and it makes poor firewood. Ezekiel implies that Israel is hardly worth throwing into the fire. Because of these references in scripture, the Jewish audience Jesus was addressing would have immediately made the allegorical connection. Thus, when the landowner destroyed the wicked tenants and gave the vineyard to others, the Jews recognized this as their nation being given over to another. This prompted their response in Luke's version of this parable, "may it never be!" It was not until this parable, when Jesus uses the image of a protected and productive vineyard to represent the image of the kingdom of God, that the Jews discover, contrary to their belief, that Jesus did not equate the nation of Israel with the kingdom of God.

The parable portrays the religious leaders ill-treating and murdering God's prophets and the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day even acknowledged themselves to be sons of those who shed the blood of prophets (Matthew 23 v 31). The parable also talks about the ill treatment and murder of the landowner's son. And here Jesus quotes from Psalm 118, one of the OT verses most quoted in the NT, "*the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief capstone (corner stone)*". For several months Jesus had been telling His disciples that the Jewish religious leaders will kill Him and, through this parable, Jesus is now telling the religious leaders themselves what they will do to Him.

In the construction of ancient stone structures, the cornerstone was the first and most important stone laid down. Also known as the foundation stone or capstone, it served as the reference point for the layout of all corners of the building and its entire structure. To qualify as the cornerstone, the stone had to be large, cut a certain way and have a flawless quality in look and substance. It was the stone most carefully scrutinized by the stone cutter, mason and architect, and a construction project may be delayed until the right cornerstone was found. Jesus, from lowly Nazareth, did not fit the Jewish religious leaders' expectation of the Messiah. He was not the military leader that would overthrow Roman rule and restore the greatness of the nation. Jesus did not meet the qualifications for the cornerstone that the Jewish builders sought but in recalling Psalm 118, not only does Jesus claim to be the Messiah, but He is the rejected cornerstone of the kingdom of God who will be vindicated and exalted.

So, what is the message for today's church leaders and for us who are members of Christ's church? I am not being disloyal when I say I am disappointed by the leadership of the Church of England. In my lifetime, there have been so many instances where strong leadership of the country as well as the church has been required and the church leadership has not been visible let alone prominent. I have spoken before about the golden opportunity that the pandemic has presented us as a church but we have left it to the politicians and the scientists to define how we should deal with the pandemic as well as lead our lives. The response to abuse in the church by church leaders themselves has been embarrassingly sad and now we are living under a regime that has nurtured a whole industry of safe-guarders and procedures that are diverting resources and draining the life out of the church.

It seems to me that several things are coming together to provide the greatest opportunity in my lifetime for us to rethink the structure and the practices of the Church of England. We must read the signs of the times. We have technological developments occurring at a rate that we cannot keep up with. There is a rising consciousness about climate change and the inequalities in society through such movements as black lives matter and the inequalities that Covid has brought to the fore. And we have the health, psychological, educational, social and economic fallout from Covid which we haven't seen the

half of yet. To say there has been a dislocation in our being church is an understatement but what an opportunity it presents. Stephen Cottrell, the new Archbishop of York, has been charged with leading a Vision and Strategy group to examine the future of the Church of England. The work of the group is said to be concerned with spiritual renewal, evangelism and discipleship. I just hope it is not financially driven. We'll see.

We may get the leaders that we deserve and we may feel powerless to influence the decisions that they make that affect our lives directly, but that does not excuse us from taking responsibility for our own lives and being church together. In His parable, Christ whilst criticising the religious leaders directly, was also criticising the Jewish people indirectly. We are reminded that the Jewish people went into exile because their prayers had been insincere, their worship empty, their devotion lacking, and their sins weighty. How are we doing against these metrics? These actions are directed towards God but we can also look at our actions towards others where we continue to give little or nothing to the hungry, give no drink to the thirsty, haven't taken in the stranger, haven't clothed the naked nor visited the sick and those in prison. (Matthew 25 42-43). We may have a lot to regret about the religious leaders of today but before we are too critical, we might want to begin by examining and amending our own attitudes, opinions and behaviour.

Amen.

The Revd John Smith