

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 17th Sunday after Trinity – 4th October 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Our Gospel reading this Sunday is the third one in a row to use the metaphor of the vineyard. Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20.1-16); then last week the parable about the two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard (Matthew 21.28-32); and today the story of the 'wicked tenants' and the owner's son, which Jesus tells in the temple in the days leading up to his arrest.

In the Scriptures, the vineyard was frequently used as a symbol for Israel, the nation loved by God. In the song of Isaiah, part of which we heard in our Old Testament reading, Israel is referred to as the 'vineyard of the Lord of hosts'. Our Psalm today uses similar language. Isaiah highlights the difference between God's hope for his beloved vineyard and the reality of his people's actions. You really need to speak Hebrew to understand the word play, but the writer says that in place of justice (*mishpat*) the Lord has found bloodshed (*mispach*). Bloodshed in Isaiah's language often refers to social exploitation and economic oppression – allowing others to suffer when you could do something about it but don't. It is the same criticism which Jesus levels at the chief priests and Pharisees in the next chapter of Matthew, when he rebukes them for focussing

on the fine details of the Law (the tithing of herbs) while avoiding the ‘weightier matters’ of ‘justice and mercy and faith’.

Isaiah’s prophetic wordplay continues when he points out that righteousness (*tsedaqah*) has been displaced by outcry (*tseaqah*) – the cry for justice of those who suffer most when it is taken away. Isaiah’s message is that the faithlessness of God’s people will culminate in their loss of the vineyard.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus presents himself as the last of a series of messengers whom God has sent to call his vineyard back to justice. But, like the prophets before him, the son in the story is captured and killed. The ‘tenants’ Jesus is referring to are the religious leaders of his time, who were listening in as he taught in the temple. Jesus emphasises his meaning by quoting Psalm 118: the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. We find the same image in the first Letter of Peter: ‘For it stands in scripture: “See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ’

Finally, Jesus states clearly that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from those who have rejected it and given to those who will faithfully produce its fruits – in other words ordinary people, whether Jewish or Gentile. The chief priests and Pharisees are left in no doubt that his criticisms are directed at them. They are furious, and their thoughts turn to his arrest.

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There is a danger for us in this parable, for it is too easy to find ourselves thinking ‘we are not like the wicked tenants in the vineyard’. As with that other parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee and the publican: ‘well, obviously I am not like the Pharisee’. But that’s part of the point of Jesus’s teaching. In every generation,

religious people are prone to think of themselves as holier than others, and in doing so to lose sight of the core of their faith. 'We wouldn't kill the son, would we?' Yet are we not prone to ignore Christ when he comes to us in the form of the stranger, the migrant, the person who is different, or awkward, or disruptive? Do we not crucify Christ daily in the people we don't help, the suffering people we walk past, the phone calls we don't make and the emails we don't send to people who need our love and our support? Next week we will be celebrating Harvest Festival, when we will turn our thoughts to how we have damaged the planet that has been entrusted to us and how it is the poorest who suffer through our casual misuse of it. Can we really look into the eyes of the starving and say 'there is nothing I can do'?

Another danger that lurks in the parable of the 'wicked tenants' is that down the centuries it has been used by Christians to justify different forms of scapegoating of the Jewish people. In falling into that trap, in common with societies throughout Europe from medieval times to the 1940s, and which had such devastating consequences, Christians failed to focus on the fact that Jesus's criticism was of the religious leaders in front of him, not of a whole people to whom he belonged. Fortunately, over the last fifty years, many parts of the Church have come to a better understanding of Jesus's Jewishness, and with it a better understanding of the excitement felt by the Gospel writers (especially Luke, in his two-part Gospel - the one which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles) that in Jesus the ancient prophecy was being fulfilled - the prophecy that Israel would become a blessing to 'all the nations'. The earliest Christian writers, including Luke and Paul, had come to the realisation that this Gospel, which had started in Galilee, was for the whole world.

Meanwhile this parable stands as a reminder that the Church has done some terrible things through the ages, and unless we are vigilant it is capable of doing them still. There is no room for complacency in hearing this story, as Jesus knew when he told it with the religious leaders of his day listening in.

One thing that struck me in reading the story again was the repetitive behaviour of the 'wicked tenants'. How often we make the same mistakes, over and over again, wounding Christ each time. There is a confession which we use in some of our services that includes the words: 'We have wounded your love, and marred your image in us.' It is true. We do it all the time.

And yet... As Paul realises, Christ changes everything. Instead of the judgment we deserve, he blesses us with his love and forgiveness. By his own example of unconditional welcome, he unlocks the potential for good within us, freeing us to welcome others unconditionally too. In our daily lives we need to keep focused on Christ and forget everything that is less important. Paul writes to the church in Philippi: 'whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ.' If – when - we manage to keep focussed on our Lord, allowing his teaching to permeate our responses to what happens to us, our lives become simpler, freer and more loving.

We are heading into a winter of fear and uncertainty. Let us not shrink in on ourselves but continue to be alert to the suffering around us, near or far. Let us hold fast to Christ and, whatever is demanded of us, let us do what we can to fulfil his loving purposes. In doing so, we will find ourselves drawing closer to him, and through him to the Creator of all, of whom our Collect today says that

our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. May they find that rest, now and always. And may we have the grace and strength to help others find it too.

Amen.