

Parable of the Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1-7

Philippians 3:4-14

Psalm 80:7-14

Matthew 21:33-46

It is small wonder that Jesus ended up being crucified! The story that Jesus tells in today's gospel would have sounded perfectly natural to those who heard it first. And as St Matthew observed, 'When the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.' He was not just speaking about them - it was very pointed criticism!

The naturalness of the parable arises because Palestine or Israel were, as they still are, vine-growing countries. There would have been vineyards all over the country. Each would have had a hedge to keep out wild animals and thieves; each would have had a watchtower where wine may have been stored and the workers slept; each would have had two troughs cut out of the rock, one for treading grapes and the other for collecting the juices as they ran out of the grapes.

Even the social and economic situations would have been recognized. Israel and Palestine were politically unstable and many landowners were very happy to let their vineyards and then live somewhere more congenial, as did the master in this story. And even the plan to kill the son would have been a realistic scenario. If a man who had converted to Judaism died without any clear heirs, then the property would pass to those who claimed it first. And who would be better placed to claim than those who were already working the land.

But the parable is unusual in two ways: first it has a clear parallel in the Old Testament; second, every character in it has significance. It is an allegory and not just a parable.

Like the parable from Isaiah, the vineyard is used as an image for the people. But whereas in Isaiah it is the whole Jewish people who are judged for not producing good fruit, in Jesus' parable it is a new set of characters, the tenants. Now, if the owner of the vineyard is God himself, then the tenants can only be those earthly leaders to whom God has delegated his authority - the chief priests and Pharisees.

And there are other new characters. There are the slaves who come as

messengers from God, surely representing the prophets, many of whom the Jewish people killed and all of whom they rejected. Then there is the ultimate prophet, the son himself - Jesus.

So the point of the parable is changed. It is no longer the Jewish people as a whole who are found wanting, but their leaders, the chief priests and the Pharisees who have rejected the prophets and who will, suggests Jesus, also reject him. It is a clear warning from Jesus that their responsibility for the care of God's people will soon be coming to an end. They have simply not been up to the job.

And there we could leave it. It is rather a comforting message for the church. The Jews, who were God's chosen people, have, in political jargon, been de-selected. And it is the Christian church which has been chosen in its place. We are now the chosen people.

But if we read with a little more discernment we will see that the parable should not be taken so lightly. It is a parable that tells us something about the nature of God. He is a God who looks for results. He is a God who trusts his chosen people but expects them to put their time to good use. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to remember this. Appropriate because we celebrate the harvest. God has given us good things materially. He expects us to make good use of them. It is appropriate as we approach All Saints and All Souls tide because it reminds us that at the end of our lives God expects some accountability. He wants to know how we have used our time in caring for his people. We as individuals are accountable. But we as a church are accountable to.

It is perhaps a parable which is particularly appropriate to us as Anglicans. We have a strong sense of continuity - we have been the Church in England for thirteen hundred years. We are part of a continuous succession of bishops, priests and deacons going back to the time of Jesus.

But Jesus makes it clear that he is interested in none of that. What he wants to know is have we produced the fruit? He does not spell out in this parable exactly what this might mean. But John's gospel records a remarkably similar conversation with a group of Jewish leaders. It is about what gives them their authority and is couched not in terms of a vineyard but in terms of being Abraham's children. The Jewish leaders respond to Jesus' criticism by saying that they are above reproach because they are 'children of

Abraham.' Jesus' reply is that if they were Abraham's children they would do what Abraham did. In other words authority comes not from your physical or legal descent but from the way you live your life.

Matthew's gospel does not record this conversation but he does record a remarkably similar exchange when John the Baptist tells the religious leaders:

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Matthew 3:8-9

John's gospel also uses the image of a vine as Jesus says:

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

John 15:5-6

As so often it is St Paul who brings us down to earth expresses Jesus poetical images in very concrete terms.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Galatians 5:22 -23

But he also spells out the opposite, those attitudes which separate us from God and render us ineffective as a church:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing etc

Galatians 5:19-21

I do not rate the danger as being very great from idolatry, sorcery, and

probably not in this congregation from fornication, impurity and licentiousness. But some of these failings sound disturbingly familiar in the contemporary church:

enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy.

What makes Paul such a convincing interpreter of Jesus' parable is that he been on both sides of the fence as it were. He has been a child of Abraham. In the letter to the Philippians which we heard a few minutes ago he wrote:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Philippians 3:4-6

But unlike most of the Pharisees and religious leaders he sets no store by any of this:

Yet 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 Jesus my Lord.

Philippians 3:7-8

This is of the greatest importance. We could interpret Jesus' parable as an exhortation to try harder to be better people, to work at it, to putting more effort. Paul does not mean this. What he wants is 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.' Or as Jesus puts it:

Abide in me as I abide in you.

John 15:4

Being a good tenant is not about working harder: it is about allowing the power of Christ to work in us to change us so that we love those around us.

It is that simple.

N Clews

8th October 2017