

MATTHEW 21:33-46
ST JOHN'S; 8.10.17; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Last week, for Harvest, we had a break from Matthew's gospel. The week before last, we read a parable which began, *The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard . . .* (Matthew 20:1).

Today, we've heard another parable about a vineyard. It might seem similar, but Jesus told it in a very different context. Since the story we heard two weeks ago, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem; Jesus has ridden into the city on a donkey, enacting Zechariah's prophecy of the Messiah's arrival; he's stirred things up by clearing the money-changers out of the Temple courts; and he's continued to wind up the Jewish religious leaders with his teaching. Reading through chapters 21 & 22, we can see that Jesus succeeds in uniting various powerful groups against him – groups such as the chief priests, teachers of the Law, elders, Pharisees, members of Herod's party, and Sadducees – groups who were usually to be found fighting each other. Jesus clearly directs today's parable, together with the Parable of the Two Sons before it, and the Parable of the Wedding Feast following it, against all these Jewish leaders.

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS IN THE VINEYARD

It wasn't difficult for the people around Jesus to understand Jesus' story. There's a very similar parable in Isaiah 5, which ends with these words: *Israel is the vineyard of the LORD Almighty; the people of Judah*

are the vines he planted (Isaiah 5:7). And this isn't the only place in the OT where the picture of a vineyard is used to mean the nation of Israel. There are other examples in Psalm 80, and Jeremiah 2.

So, *the chief priests and the Pharisees* would have known immediately that the vineyard in his story was a picture of Israel. The owner must therefore represent God himself. The servants who came to collect the rent represent the prophets. The prophets came as God's messengers to his people, but as the people usually didn't like the message they brought, they made a habit of rejecting them, or even killing them. Clearly, therefore, the son in the story represents Jesus himself. And even that aspect would have been clear to anyone who'd kept themselves informed about Jesus' life and teaching (cf Matthew 3:17; 11:27; 17:5).

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks the Jewish leaders, *Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?* (v 40). They blurt out the obvious answer, *He will certainly kill those evil men, and rent the vineyard out to other tenants, who will give him his share of the harvest at the right time* (v 41). They're right of course – and as they speak, they condemn themselves. Jesus' story has shown them up for what they are: flagrantly disloyal to the Lord their God, guilty of taking his property, rejecting his prophets, denying his rightful claim on their lives, and killing his Son.

Jesus pronounces the sentence: *And so I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the*

proper fruits (v 43). There's no room for complacency in God's kingdom; in the face of stubborn and flagrant disloyalty, he has every right to reject his people and to put others in their place.

THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED

It seems very odd to us that between a story about a vineyard, with a conclusion which talks about the harvest, and the warning that *the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits* (v 43), Jesus puts in a quote from Psalm 118 about stonemasons: *The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all . . .* (v 42).

It wouldn't have seemed quite so odd to the people who heard Jesus telling this story. The words for 'son' and 'stone' are very similar in Hebrew, and they loved plays on words. In English, the words 'son' and 'sun' sound the same, and there are places in Scripture where we might struggle to know which one was meant. For example, in this quote: . . . *because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven* (Luke 1:78).

The verse which Jesus quotes about the stone the builders rejected was often referred to in discussions about the coming Messiah. As Jesus uses it here, it has various layers of meaning:

Firstly, the parable tells of the tenants grabbing the vineyard owner's son, throwing him out of the vineyard and killing him. Jesus takes this up and reverses it: *the stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. This was done by the Lord . .*

. (v 42). The Jewish nation might have rejected Jesus, but God will vindicate him. Jesus Christ is foundational. Everything rests on him. The reference to the most important stone of all would also have brought to the minds of OT scholars some other references in stones. Our first hymn this morning was based on Isaiah 28:16: *the sovereign Lord says: "I am placing in Zion a foundation that is firm and strong. In it I am putting a solid cornerstone on which are written the words, 'Faith that is firm is also patient'.* Jesus implicitly applies that verse to himself: he is tested, precious, and a sure foundation – in contrast to the perishable, false, human foundation of disobedient Israel.

Another reference which would have been in the minds of anyone who knew their Scriptures is in Daniel 2:34-35: Daniel is interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue (Banana Club have very kindly provided us with a model of that statue). Daniel says to Nebuchadnezzar: *while you were looking at [the statue], a great stone broke loose from a cliff . . . struck the iron and clay feet of the statue, and shattered them . . . the stone grew to be a mountain that covered the whole earth.* The stone here represents a kingdom that will destroy and greatest empires of the world and fill the earth.

And so, when Jesus calls himself *the stone* [which] *turned out to be the most important of all*, he's claiming to be the only proper foundation for life, the foundation provided by God. If we disobey him, we'll only hit our shins and break our bones. If we defy him, we'll find that life will be crushed out of us.

CONCLUSION

Beware complacency! Only a few days later, all those groups of Jewish leaders, together with many of the ordinary people, were shouting loudly, *Crucify him!* They thought they were safe. They were God's chosen people. He'd promised never to leave them or forsake them.

The church down the centuries has often behaved in the same way that the Jewish leaders were behaving here. We've been guilty of complacency, of bullying people, of trying to keep God's blessings for ourselves rather than sharing them, of looking down on people who have a different colour skin, or who don't dress or speak 'properly', and making it very difficult for such people to join us in church. And God is just as able to *rent the vineyard out to other tenants* now as he was back then.

On the other hand, our Lord is infinitely patient with us, so long as we recognise that he is our Lord, and that he has a right to expect loyalty and obedience from us. None of us is perfect; we all get it wrong – frequently! But if we've built our lives on the foundation stone that is Jesus Christ, we have nothing to fear. Here's another reference to rock, or stone: Jesus said, *Anyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed, and the wind blew hard against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock* (Matthew 7:24-25).