

The parable of the Tenants

Date: 28 March 2021, Palm Sunday

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Stories along the Way (Parables in Luke)

Texts: Luke 19:11-27; Psalm 2; 1 Peter 4:1-11

Over the past 3 months we've been on the road with Jesus. He's been walking from Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way he's been teaching his disciples and us what it means to live in the kingdom of God. I've thoroughly enjoyed reflecting on Jesus' parables. I don't know whether you've noticed, but nearly all the parables we've looked at have been about moving us to act. Jesus finishes the Good Samaritan with these words to the lawyer: *Go and do likewise*. The parables have directed Jesus' first hearers and us to respond to Jesus as the King of God's kingdom. When we come to the parable of the tenants in Luke 20, the journey is over. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. Now there is a shift in this parable. It's not directed at us and our response. This parable is all about Jesus and who he is. And it's about a very specific moment in time.

Today enter what has been called Holy Week, walking through the events of the final week of Jesus' life. Whether you're a Christian or if you're exploring faith with us, this is a week to slow down and meditate on who Jesus is and what he came to do. The week starts on Palm Sunday. We have seen Jesus entering Jerusalem. He rides on a donkey, in fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy,

*Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Crowds throng around him. They praise God in the words of Psalm 118.

*'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!
'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'*

The Psalm goes on to say,

*From the house of the Lord we bless you.
The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.*

And so Jesus goes up to the house of the LORD - the temple. He finds it turned into a marketplace and throws the merchants out. And each day he stands in the temple, teaching

the people, proclaiming the good news of God. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. The people hang off his every word. But the leaders of Israel, the guardians of God's house and God's law are not so sure. Things are already delicate with Rome. If Jesus is king, what will that mean for their authority? And so they ask him:

Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,' they said. 'Who gave you this authority?'
Jesus skewers them with a question of his own:

John's baptism – was it from heaven, or of human origin?'

Their own hearts are exposed.

They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, "From heaven," he will ask, "Why didn't you believe him?" 6 But if we say, "Of human origin," all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet.'

So they reply. *We don't know where it was from,'*

If they won't declare their hand, then Jesus will. And so he tells the people today's parable.

'A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.

The listening crowd would have known immediately what Jesus was talking about. Hundreds of years before the prophet Isaiah had also told a story of a vineyard.

*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.¹*

God is the owner and the vineyard is God's people. In Matthew's account of this story Jesus names the vineyard as the Kingdom of God. Would Jesus' story play out the same way as Isaiah's? Would the vineyard be fruitful? Or would it be full of bloodshed and distress? The question hangs in the air as Jesus continues.

At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 11 He sent another servant, but that one also they beat and treated shamefully and sent away empty-handed. 12 He sent still a third, and they wounded him and threw him out.

Again the crowd would have known who Jesus was talking about. God had sent his prophets again and again to warn his people Israel; to call them to turn from injustice and idolatry and to come back to him. But they had an appalling track record of listening. Instead prophet

¹ Isaiah 5:1-6

after prophet was ignored, abused, hunted down. Jeremiah was beaten and thrown into a well. Zechariah was stoned at the foot of the altar.

I remember as a teenager hearing a sermon at the consecration of a bishop in PNG. The preacher warned the bishop. As goes head of the river, so goes the river. If the headwaters are fouled, the whole river will be fouled. What is true in the church was true for ancient Israel. While it was the nation who had failed to heed the words of the prophets, it was the leaders of the people who were particularly responsible.

Now we come to the heart of the parable.

‘Then the owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.”

Who is the son? The words *my son, whom I love*, recall the words Jesus heard from heaven at his baptism: *this is my Son whom I love*. And again at his transfiguration: *this is my Son whom I love. Listen to him*. God the Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has sent his Son to his own people. The Son is the final and ultimate prophet who speaks on God’s behalf. This is why Jesus has the authority to say and do what he says and does. How will they respond to his coming? Will they respect him? Perhaps. Or perhaps not.

‘But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. “This is the heir,” they said. “Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” 15 So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Jesus anticipates what will come to pass in only a few short days. The leaders of Israel had forgotten they were only tenants in God’s vineyard. With their power under threat they would band together to orchestrate his execution. How will the owner of the vineyard respond?

‘What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.’

When the people heard this, they said, ‘God forbid!’

Are they shocked at the treatment of the Son or at what Jesus words signify about the nation? At this point we remember Jesus’ words as he stood at the threshold of Jerusalem, just a few verses back:

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only

known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you.”²

The day Jesus predicted did indeed come. In AD66 the Jews revolted against Roman occupation. In 70 Roman armies commanded by the future emperor Titus surround Jerusalem. After a 7 month siege they breached the city walls. The result was a bloodbath. Hundreds of thousands of Jews perished. Josephus records that 97,000 were taken as slaves to Rome where among other things they built the Colosseum. Jerusalem and its temple were reduced to rubble. Not one stone left upon another. The event was commemorated in Rome by the building of a triumphal arch that you can see to this day.

What are we to make of Jesus' parable and these events? First, this is one of those moments where something prophesied in Scripture has come true in real flesh and blood history. What Jesus said would happen did happen. Despite being rejected and crucified, he was vindicated. And so the vineyard was given to others. Because Israel had rejected Jesus as her Messiah the Kingdom of God would be given to others. Jesus would build the true temple, made of living stones, women and men who own him as saviour and Lord. God's people would now be built on and around him as the cornerstone. It took some time and the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit to convince the apostles but eventually they came to see that God's people would now be drawn from every language and tribe and nation. Any doubt that this was God's plan was removed when Jerusalem was destroyed.

This time it is Jesus' who quotes Psalm 118 to the people.

Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written:

“The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone”?

18 *Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.’*

To reject him as the king is to stand under his judgment.

One objection that could be raised at this point is whether this text is anti Semitic. Sadly the church has at times justified the mistreatment of Jews on the grounds that they killed the Messiah. But this is to take matters into our own hands. God's judgment on the Jewish

² Luke 19:41-44

nation fell in AD70 and there is no license to repeat that singular event. We are always called to love our neighbours as ourselves. And what's more the good news of Jesus is always first for the Jew and then for the rest of the nations.

But let's step back to Jesus' immediate audience again. Read with me verse 19.

The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them.

There is a great irony that the Jewish leaders knew Jesus spoke this parable against them. Yet instead of heeding Jesus' warning they set about doing exactly what Jesus said they would do - conspiring to kill him. This is so tragic when we consider the words at the heart of the parable.

Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."

The chief priests, the scribes and the elders all conspire against the Lord and his anointed, but here we catch a glimpse of the divine conspiracy.

In the culture of Jesus' day, how you treated someone's servants was a statement about how you felt about their master. By abusing the servants the tenants in the vineyard had insulted the owner. By rights he would see them brought to justice and his honour restored. Will he come in wrath? *What shall I do?* He says. In those words we hear not just anger and frustration, but also sorrow and anguish, a longing for the tenants to come to their senses, to turn and seek peace. And so he makes a plan with his son, his only son, the son he loves. He will go to these cutthroats. Alone. Unarmed. Vulnerable.

I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.

In his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey says that most Arabic translations render that last phrase as "perhaps they will feel shame in his presence." The owner has an honour that runs deeper than the insults of the tenants; an honour that will not respond to their injustice with violence but vulnerability. Bailey calls this the "unspeakable nobility" of the owner who is willing to risk the greatest loss in order to "awaken a long-forgotten sense of honour" in the hearts of these violent men.

To illustrate the point Bailey tells the story of king Hussein of Jordan.

"One night in the early 1980s, the king was informed by his security police that a

group of about 75 Jordanian army officers were at that very moment meeting in a nearby barracks plotting a [coup]. The security officers wanted to surround the barracks and arrest the rebels. The king however refused. Instead he said, "Bring me a small helicopter." The helicopter came and the king climbed in alone with the pilot and flew to the barracks, landing on the roof. He told the pilot, "If you hear gun shots, fly away without me."

Unarmed, the king walked down the stairs and suddenly appeared in the room full of the conspirators.

"Gentlemen," he said, "It has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalise your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way only one man will die."

There was a stunned silence. Then, as one, the rebels rushed forward and kissed the king's hand and feet, pledging lifelong loyalty to him."³

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the prince of heaven, came to this world, humbly, utterly vulnerable. But unlike king Hussein, he was taken and mocked and beaten and killed. And as he hung there dying in words of unspeakable nobility he prayed for his murderers, for wicked humanity, for each one of us who in the darkness of our hearts would rise up to slay him, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is my hope and prayer that this Holy Week your heart and my heart may be melted by the unspeakable nobility of the Son, the only Son, dying in our place to reconcile us to the Father. May we fall on our knees and kiss his feet in loyalty and love.

³ Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 418-19