

St Brandon's Sunday 4th October 2020.
Philippians 3: 4b- 14; Matthew 21: 33-46

Listen to another parable...

Let us pray

Lord speak to us now through your word and gives us ears to hear, and hearts to respond to you. For Christ's sake. Amen

Listen to another parable!

We've heard a few parables recently as we have read through the later chapters of Matthew's gospel. As Geoff reminded us last week, we are with Jesus in Jerusalem, in the last week before his crucifixion, what we now call Holy Week. Today's story follows directly from last week's: Jesus is teaching in the Temple and the religious leaders are increasingly bothered by him. They want to arrest him but are afraid to do so because of his popularity with the crowds- his charisma as a teacher, his empathy and compassion, the way he makes people laugh, listen, think.

Jesus has just turned the tables on them, by making them admit, at the end of the previous parable, that it's the 'losers' who will win the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religious people...and in this second story he does this again, telling a story, and asking a question. So here we go: Listen to another parable!

Or as we might put it these days: *Did you hear the one about the rich vineyard owner?* Now, many of the religious leaders listening are owners of fertile estates on the hillsides around Jerusalem, employing staff or tenants to work the land and bring in the harvest. They identify with the scene Jesus paints – planting a vineyard, building a wall, digging the wine press, hiring the staff and awaiting the produce and profits. So far, so good. This is the third 'vineyard' story Jesus has told, according to Matthew. We know too that vineyard imagery is frequent in the old testament. They all know Jesus is talking about God as the owner of the vineyard.

He tells them the story. The tenants reject each of the slaves sent by the owner, with increasing violence, until they even reject and kill the owner's son. That's a bit much, isn't it?

And Jesus follows up with his leading question:

What will the owner do to those tenants?

The answer's not difficult, particularly to men used to hiring and firing. But the tables have been turned. And before the answer has left their lips, the chief priests and Pharisees know that for once they're not the *owner*, but the tenants, who deserve to be fired or worse, because they've not served the owner as they should, despite all the warnings.

A moment passes, the silence is palpable as that answer sinks in, then Jesus delivers his conclusion, referencing two verses of Scripture.

Firstly from Psalm 118

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"

If that's familiar it may be because it appears in 3 places in the new testament and we're going to divert briefly to identify the other two.

It's in Peter's defence in Acts 4, also delivered in Jerusalem and also to the Jewish authorities, who have imprisoned him and John to prevent them spreading the gospel. Peter explains exactly who Jesus is, with this verse as the climax of his argument. Surely as Peter spoke, he was remembering Jesus' words here, not so long before. It's such a powerful image, especially when delivered in the temple courts, full of grand architecture and mighty stones.

The verse is used similarly in the first letter of Peter – recounting how Jesus was rejected but then raised up to become the cornerstone on whom the whole building depends.

The second Scripture Jesus alludes to is from Daniel, when the prophet is interpreting the king's dream of a huge statue – or an earthly kingdom- which is toppled by a stone. *'The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'*

You may remember the striking image back in 2003 of the huge statue of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein being toppled from its plinth in Baghdad – symbolising his downfall as US forces took control of the city.

Well the dream Daniel similar to that, and for the Jews, this image evoked the great empires who had oppressed them, Babylon, Persia and now Rome.

For them, the Messiah was to be the stone who would topple the empire, rescue them and bring in God's kingdom.

With these two verses of Scripture, Jesus has brought his story into the centre of Jewish religion and politics- which were thoroughly mixed then as now. But, in doing so he has turned the tables again, because the stone, the Messiah, is not who they were expecting. To fully get this, we need to take another short diversion, this time into crosswords!

Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures, is full of word play, often around homonyms, rather like our crosswords. The Hebrew word for stone is *eben* and the word for son is *ben*. You can see, and hear the Son in the stone...

Actually it's there in English spelling too- remove the t and e and there is the Son: *the stone is the Son.*

The message is clear – you are rejecting the stone, who is the Son, but he will ultimately triumph over all earthly powers and authorities, and reign over God's kingdom.

No wonder the chief priests and Pharisees got the message of this parable: within days they will indeed arrest him, reject him, and kill him, just as the story said. But that will not be the end.

Because that same stone, or Son, will be raised up: through his death and resurrection he will initiate God's new kingdom on earth.

Listen to this parable.

Listen to its stark warning to anyone who thinks they are secure in their own position, achievements, or religious credentials. And that may well include me and you. (It's a dangerous story to read in a dog collar!)

It certainly included Paul, composing his letter to the young church in Philippi, from prison

In today's first reading he enumerates all his religious qualifications to prove that he has every box ticked and every rule kept, 'righteous under the law', as he puts it.

Then he topples that totem, that statue with the stone- the Son - as he writes *whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.*

In another words, nothing is more important to Paul than his relationship with Christ.

Everything he previously valued is as nothing – rubbish, he says- compared to what, or who, he has come to know, in a compelling transforming way .

As we cope with the uncertainties, changes and losses of this time, we can remember that Paul's had some turbulent times too- false arrest, beatings, imprisonment.

For him, this suffering draws him closer to Christ his Lord. And he looks forward with hope and determination, pressing on towards the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Lets press on to, to know Christ more in every part of our lives, individually and together.

Listen to this parable.

Listen, finally, to the encouragement that the kingdom of God will be given to those who produce the fruits of the kingdom.

May this coming season, when we will be digging deeper spiritually, produce in and through us a harvest for God's kingdom.

A harvest of love, hope, kindness, strength, and even a harvest of joy in knowing Christ as our Lord.

Amen.