

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Trinity 17

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isaiah 5:1-7 Ps 80: 9-17 Philippians 3:4b-15

Matthew: 21:33-end

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Listen to another parable.....says Jesus to us today.

Another precious gift of a story, given to us before we were born.

How might it open to us today?

Matthew tells us how it opened for Jesus' first listeners: the chief priests and Pharisees engaged with Jesus' storytelling as they judged the ungrateful tenants, but turned on Jesus as he revealed to them that they might indeed be those tenants- who risked losing their privilege to those who would bear fruit for the Owner. Their hostility arose when they saw the place he gave them in the parable – and they confirmed his observation by reacting to him just like the tenants of the story. The parable had opened to confound and condemn them.

For the early church, as they listened to this parable passed down to them in the tradition, it opened as a prophecy of what was to come for Jesus, the crucified one they acclaimed as God's Son, and the emergence of the church after his death. Set against a number of scriptural passages (like the Old Testament reading and Psalm verses also set for today) where God's provision for God's people is described as the building of a secure vineyard, they interpreted this parable as an allegory – likening the slaves to the prophets of the past and seeing the son as Jesus, so that in the words that follow the parable they read a promise for them: they had become those who would bear the fruits of the Kingdom to whom the vineyard was given. The parable opened to affirm and inspire them.

Where you find yourself in the story makes a huge difference to how comfortably it opens to you.

And, I think the power of Jesus' parables is that they ask each listener to find where they are in the story anew on every reading. As we listen to the gospel in the context of worship, we are invited to be open to the Holy Spirit bringing us the words as if for the first time.

Jesus' invitation to "listen" is an invitation to listen to the story with an openness to respond and act on whatever we are shown.

Today Jesus offers us two complementary pictures:

tenants in a vineyard

builders choosing the cornerstone, the stone from which all construction is orientated, for their building.

The owner has created all that is necessary for the vineyard to be fruitful, and has leased it to those who tend it and brings its fruits to harvest.

The tenants ignore their relationship and agreement with the owner and do all that is in their power to hold onto the gains of the harvest for themselves. They consider the fruit of the land their own, not honouring the arrangement that says they are temporary tenants and kill even the owner's son so they can call the land their own.

They are contrasted with responsible tenants who know that the harvest is not their won, and honour their relationship with owner and their agreement with him over the plunder of the land.

Where am I, where are you, in this story?

When look around ourselves at all that we have been given by the Creator, and the covenant of faith in which we have chosen to live as those who seek to follow Christ – are we good tenants, good stewards of the gifts of creation and the Kingdom? Are we the kind of tenants Jesus praises – who offer the fruit of all that we have been given to God, or are we trying to hoard all that originates as gift, whatever work we might add to it?

In this time of the church year when we often turn our eyes to the gifts of creation, we might specifically reflect on this parable as a story of our treatment of the whole earth, created by God, and given to those also created, to be stewards. How often as human beings we plunder the harvest of land, sea and earth, for gain, setting up trade systems that allow the wealthy to accrue wealth while the poorest suffer, and disrupting the ecological balance destructively? Is this the return the Creator expects?

How often, I wonder do we really think about **all** that we are and all that we have as things that we are dependent on God for, things that are fully dependent on our relationship as creatures and in the use of which we responsible for bringing to God the "fruits of the Kingdom"? Or are we more concerned to see ourselves a self-made and gather our harvest for ourselves?

I don't know about you, but I can see both tendencies in my own behaviour: there are times when I am deeply aware of God's loving relationship with me, and I'm filled with great joy in co-operating that love at work and offering my harvest to God of a the fruits of the kingdom: a life lived in co-operation with God's grace as the person God is calling me to be on this earth. And there are also times when I drift further away from my dependence on God and try to do things on my own strength, my own way and for reasons that are not of God. Perhaps, I don't fall away as far as beating up his prophet's but my life is a mixture of being a good and a bad tenant.

I suspect many of us recognise that mixture.

If so, how is the parable opening to us today?

How might it encourage us to renew our relationship with the Owner of the Vineyard and bring him his harvest with joy?

And what of our choice of corner stone?

The cornerstone was a stone used as the reference point for creating a structurally sound building. There might be many reasons why builders might reject a stone for that purpose; put simply though, it didn't look as though it was going to enable a

conventionally aligned building. Jesus is applying the metaphor to himself. There will be times when aligning ourselves to Jesus means living differently from socially conventional values – just as the early church members became outsiders both to the religious communities they sprang from, and to the prevailing ruling culture.

It is making this decision, to align ourselves by the new and living cornerstone that is Jesus that we find the courage to be the true faithful tenants in the vineyard, bringing forth the fruits of the Kingdom in all that we are.

And the church offers us ways to align and re-align our lives to Jesus in so many ways as we share our lives together as those called to be his body on earth

We are called to

– follow his example and teaching listening to his word alive in scripture as we gather around it in worship and study it for ourselves at home

- open our hearts to receiving him in communion,
- allow the grace of our baptism in him to shape in us the pattern of his life, death and resurrection
- and discover him as our companion in regular prayer day in and day out.

By their response to the story, the chief priests and the Pharisees got stuck in a fixed place in it.

Today Jesus calls us to listen and respond:

to choose where we want to be by aligning ourselves wholeheartedly to him as our unconventional cornerstone

May we pray that he will guide us towards a faithful harvest for his kingdom by all that we do and say and are in the coming week.

Amen

