

It is normally a first principle that every parable has only one point and that the details are not the teaching points to be stressed. If we try to find a meaning for every detail, we turn the parable into an allegory - and that was not Jesus' preferred teaching technique. But in this case it is different. In this parable all the details do have a meaning and the chief priests and the Pharisees well knew what Jesus was meaning this parable to say to them. Jesus was in the temple courts and telling this and other parables in response to the challenge: "Who gave you authority to teach?"

Every detail is founded on what, for those who heard it, was familiar fact. The Jewish nation as the vineyard of God was a familiar prophetic picture. "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel". The hedge was a thick-set thorn hedge, designed to keep out both the wild boars who might ravage the vineyard, and the thieves who might steal the grapes. And having felt the thorn bushes in Cappadocia I can testify that they rip you to bits, they are like barbed wire.

Every vineyard had its wine press and tower. The tower had a double purpose. It was a watch-tower, from which to watch for thieves when the grapes were ripening; and it provided lodging for those who were working in the vineyard.

The actions of the owner of the vineyard were all quite normal. In the time of Jesus, Palestine was a troubled place with little luxury. Absentee landlords were commonplace. In Palestine they were rich enough to buy the land and let out parcels of their estate and were interested only in collecting the rental at the right time. The rent was usually paid in any of three ways: cash, a fixed amount of the fruit, no matter what the crop might be; or an agreed percentage of the crop.

Oddly enough, the bad behaviour of the workers in the vineyard was not unusual either. There was economic unrest; the working people were discontented and rebellious; and the action of the cultivators in seeking to eliminate the son was not by any means impossible. Perhaps Jesus was actually recalling a local and recent case in the news.

So it was easy for those who heard this parable, especially the religious authorities, to make the necessary connections. Lets just spell them out. The vineyard is the nation of Israel, and its owner is God. The cultivators or tenants are the religious leaders of Israel, whom God had entrusted the

cultivation of the spiritual welfare of the nation. The messengers who were sent successively are the prophets sent by God and so often rejected and killed. The son who came last is none other than Jesus himself. Here in a vivid story,, Jesus set out both the history and the doom of Israel, and the fate of the owner's son.

Jesus teaches a lot about God, men and women and human nature, and also about his role as the Saviour.

Jesus shows clearly that God's **trusts** in men and women. The owner of the vineyard entrusted it to the cultivators. He simply left them to it, and he did not stand over them to supervise their work. He went away and left them with their task. God pays us the compliment of entrusting us with his work.

Jesus shows how **patient** God is. The landowner sent messenger after messenger. He did not come with sudden vengeance when one messenger had been abused and ill-treated. He gave the tenants chance after chance to respond to his appeal. God keeps faith with us even when we let Him down, time and time again.

But, Jesus points out that God **does act in the end**. Eventually, God took his trust from the rebellious tenants and gave his trust to others who would value and repay it. In the end the master of the vineyard took the vineyard from the cultivators and gave it to others. Just think what Jesus in this story is saying to the Chief Priests - this jumped up untrained teacher is presuming to say that god will dispose of US! He has already won the crowd over with the Lazarus incident. What the heck can we do to him - and of course we know the answer - it was the one Jesus predicted.

Jesus provides interesting thoughts about men and women in this story.

Jesus shows us the **privilege** of being God's tenants in this world. The vineyard was equipped with absolutely everything the tenants would need: the hedge, the wine press, and the tower. All set up to make the task of the tenants relatively easy and enable them to discharge it well. God does not only give us a task to do; he also gives us the means whereby to do it.

Jesus shows us the **freedom** we are granted. The land owner left the tenants to do the task as they liked. God is not a slave driver. He is happy to delegate.

As a senior Army Officer, I found this one of the hardest things to do - usually I reckoned I could do all the jobs that had to be done better than my staff could. But you have to leave them to learn by doing, and by bruising their knuckles in the process.

However, once the task is delegated, Jesus does point out that humans are **answerable** for their performance. We are answerable for the way in which we have carried out the task God gave us to do. In the end, he sent his Son to call the world to acknowledge the kingdom of God and recognize that God is the King of that kingdom.

Lastly of course, Jesus points out that **sin** is the result of a greedy, self-interested choice. No sin of omission this - they decided to kill the son of the owner. It was in their interest to do so. Sin is deliberate opposition to God's commands. Love God with all our being and love our neighbour as ourselves. Sin is simply the falling short of God's ideal. It is the deliberate taking of our own way when we know quite well what the way of God is.

Humans today claim the right over life and death. We can kill thousands with bombs and find ourselves cheering. We say, "It is my body and my choice. It doesn't matter if the baby within me wants to live. I want it dead." We say, "It doesn't matter if we are harvesting unborn children; we need the stem cells." We want the freedom to clone human embryos and become like God. What we would do with that technology staggers the mind. We want to rape the earth, regardless of what it does to future generations, as long as I get what I need. We want sex as recreation, removed from the act of creation and responsibility. We want to use our money as we please without regard for those in need. We don't want to have to answer to God for any of these things. "It is our world. It is my life. And I will do as I please." That's sin - the sin that Jesus says will demand an accounting and an answer.

Although I have used modern examples, I am sure there were many shifting uncomfortably in the temple courtyard on the day after his triumphal entry would have got the point, made the connections, picked up the inferences. They were used to parables - they knew how they were to be applied.

In this parable, here in the temple in the last week of his ministry, Jesus shows the chief priests and all who were there, and us today too, at least two important things about himself.

The parable sets out *the claim of Jesus*. Jesus is quite clearly identified as the son in the story. All those who came before him were the messengers of God; no one could deny them that honour; but they were *servants*; he was the *Son*. This parable contains one of the clearest claims Jesus ever made to be unique, to be different from even the greatest of those who went before.

And the story clearly foreshadows the *sacrifice of Jesus*. It makes it clear that Jesus knew what lay ahead. In the parable, the hands of wicked men killed the son. Jesus was never in any doubt of what lay ahead. He did not die because he was compelled to die; he went willingly and open-eyed to death.

The theme of this parable of Jesus has also been told and retold in the literature of the world. Stories like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" or Goethe's *Faust*. Many more literary pieces could be cited which reflect man's rebellion against God and his desire to be in control of his world.

But, perhaps, the greatest piece is Fyodor Dostoevski's book 'The Brothers Karamazov'. A modern parable. There is a chapter called "The Grand Inquisitor." Ivan Karamazov is telling his brother a story that he has just written. The setting is Spain, during the Spanish Inquisition where many people were put to death by the church for almost any heretical belief — real or imagined. In the story,

Christ decides to reappear on earth during the time of the Inquisition. He comes quietly and inconspicuously, but everyone recognizes him and many are excited about his appearance. He says almost nothing, but people are drawn to him by an irresistible force. He stretches his hand out to bless the people and they are healed as he touches them. Christ is walking by the great Cathedral of Seville just as a child's little coffin is brought in, with weeping parents who follow it into the church. Inside the casket is a lifeless little girl of seven. The child's mother implores Christ to bring her back. Without a word he touches the young girl and raises her from the dead.

Meanwhile, the bishop is looking on disapprovingly. His face darkens and he orders the arrest of the Stranger. But during the night, the Bishop descends the stairs into the cavern of the Sacred Court building where the Stranger is being held in a dark, vaulted prison. The Bishop, who is the Grand Inquisitor,

looks at Christ in the squalid cell and says, “Is it you? You? Why did you come to meddle with us? Tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the vilest of heretics, and the same people who today kissed your feet, will at the first sign from me rush to rake up the coals at your stake tomorrow.”

But the Grand Inquisitor somehow changes his mind, and the story ends with these words: “When the Inquisitor finished speaking, he waited for some time for the Prisoner’s reply. His silence distressed him. He saw that the Prisoner had been listening intently to him all the time, looking gently into his face and evidently not wishing to say anything in reply. The old man would have liked him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But [the Prisoner] suddenly approached the old man and kissed him gently. That was all his answer. The old man gave a start. He went to the door, opened it and said to him: ‘Go, and come no more — don’t come at all — never, never!’ And he let him out into ‘the dark streets and lanes of the city.’ The Prisoner went away.”

That is the story of the world. It is how we still treat the son of the Landowner. And the interesting thing is that both in Dostoevski’s story and Jesus’ parable, it is the religious folk who reject Jesus. The Bible says that the Pharisees knew that he was talking about them. They were the religious leaders who envied him. Even in the arena of religion God is not welcome. He is too radical. He is too awesome. His person and power are overwhelming. We prefer a god we can understand, control and even manipulate.

I don't really think I want to say anything else. As we go into Holy Week I will leave these truths which I personally find uncomfortable hanging, so we can work at them in our hearts and perhaps make a renewed offering to our crucified saviour next friday.