

# Trinity 20 5<sup>th</sup> October Hepple

## The Workers in the Vineyard

The parable in our Gospel today has been the source of much that was evil in Christianity over the years, as I hope to explain.

Our Gospel reading today is the third in a series of parables which grew out of the demand of the chief priests and elders for Jesus to explain what authority He had for cleansing the temple. As the custodians of the spiritual life of the nation, they had the right to ask this question. But surely they knew the answer by now. Jesus had given them three years of ministry, and they still would not face the facts. They wanted more evidence.

This parable is an allegory about faithlessness and judgement. It is perhaps less specific than some of Jesus' teaching, and it has been mis-represented by some over the years. As an allegory, it is true to life but not every element has a symbolic meaning. We should only draw out the main elements. Very broadly they are: the vineyard stands for Israel; the householder stands for God; the tenant farmers stand for leaders of Israel - not the whole of the nation of Israel, and this is where the understanding has often gone wrong. This parable does not, emphatically not justify the anti-semitism which the Christian church practised in the middle ages. The fruit stands for what is owed to God; the rejection of servants stands for rejection of prophets; the sending and rejection of the son stand for the sending and rejection of Jesus; the punishment of tenants stands for Jerusalem's destruction; the new tenants stand for the church.

The hearers of course knew that the rich, the Landowners always had power, socially and legally, to enforce their will on the tenants; a few reportedly even had squads of hired assassins to deal with troublesome tenants. As so often, Jesus turns things upside down: the tenants act as if *they* are the ones with power, and they exploit it mercilessly (as opposed to the ideal of a *benevolent* landowner). It was clear in Jewish tradition in Jesus day, that Israel martyred many of the prophets God sent.

While in the Old Testament Israel is often described as God's vineyard, this time the passage is not about God's rejection of *all* the Jews. I do need to stress this point. Jesus' target is not the Jews in general but the Jewish leaders in particular. And the reason Jesus told the parable at all arises from the context of a conflict of ideas between himself and Israel's leaders. Jesus kept the law - was here to fulfill it. He was definitely NOT having a go at Judaism; it is not the vineyard (i.e. Israel) that suffers judgement but those in charge. So the kingdom is taken from the Jewish leaders and given to the church of Jew and Gentile together.

Matthew's version of this story condensed Mark's early account a bit. There we learn that Jesus said the first three slaves came separately, one after another. The wicked tenants beat, or scourged, the first slave, leaving him bruised and bloody. The second slave they killed outright and then stoned a third. After that, the owner sent another group of slaves larger than the first, and they did the same thing to them, "beating some and killing others"

As any rabbi would, Jesus led His hearers to finish off the story themselves by asking, "What will the owner do to those vine-growers?" The chief priests and elders readily replied with moral indignation, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." I'm sure they were highly pleased with this opportunity to parade their righteousness before Jesus. Oh yes, they got the ending right - that the furious owner would first severely punish the wicked growers and then replace them with others who were reliable. But they were completely unaware that Jesus had led them right into a trap - for as they answered with such moral indignation, they were describing what should happen to all the leaders of Israel, themselves included.

Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? At first glance, this comment seems irrelevant to the parable. But the Lord was using a familiar passage from the Old Testament to reinforce the parable's point, and in doing so He changed

metaphors. In a sarcastic query He asked the self-appointed authorities on the Old Testament, “Did you never read in the Scriptures?” and then cited the well-known words of [Psalm 118:22](#), the same psalm from which were came the acclamations of the multitude in His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when He was hailed by the messianic title, Son of David. And it was, in fact, for His accepting that messianic praise that Jesus was rebuked by the Pharisees ([Luke 19:39](#)) Now, from the same section of the psalm, Jesus reminded the religious leaders of the stone which the builders rejected that became the chief cornerstone.

The building referred to is the temple; as the cornerstone of a new temple, or perhaps a keystone of an arch is a better translation, Jesus poses a threat to the builders of the old one (the Jewish aristocracy). Israel had always seen itself as the “holy nation” but the threat of transferring their status was alarming. God could replace them. As they had not given up any fruit - their part of the contract with God - the Covenant - Jesus says that they will cease to be the chosen nation.

But the metaphor of the capstone has an even greater significance for Peter declared in Jerusalem before the religious rulers shortly after Pentecost, “Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead ... He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” ([Acts 4:10–12](#)).

Jesus thereby tied the messianic psalm to the parable in order to reinforce His point. The rejected Son and the rejected stone both refer to Christ. The verse from [Psalm 118](#) goes beyond the parable to allude also to the resurrection of the Son, something the parable could not cover and still maintain its simple naturalness.

I am going to stop there. When Jesus talks to the Jewish leaders who had grown comfortable and complacent, we need to be sure that we are not cast in the same

mould.