

Matthew 21:33-end – Sermon for 10am

Our reading this morning from Matthew's Gospel has everything in it. It's a story that Jesus told in response to the Chief Priests and Elders of the Jewish people rejecting his authority, just like the story from last week's sermon. But its scope is massive and it goes much further on in the story than simply talking about the rejection of his authority. Last week we talked about not being able to sit on the fence on issues of faith, and this week, we are talking about the consequences of this.

The story Jesus tells this week is basically the whole story of the bible in brief, so we are going to go through that quickly and then think about what it means for us today. But as we go through, please bear in mind that it is way too easy to point fingers and feel self-righteous – there's a sting in the tail for everyone in this story. You will also benefit from following the story through in your bibles.

In verse 33 the landowner plants a vineyard, builds a fence, digs a winepress and puts in a watchtower. In short, he does everything that is required to create a fruitful and prosperous harvest. He's not the landlord that does everything on the cheap and you find that when you turn on a tap, the shower turns on as well, or when you open a window, the pane of glass falls out. Instead, the vineyard is perfect; it's ready for tenants; and it is set up for their flourishing. I hope this might be ringing some bells in the back of your mind, because this is exactly the picture of creation at the very start of the bible. By whatever means, God prepared the world and saw that it was really good. It has everything in it for our flourishing.

In our story, the landowner leases the vineyard to some tenants, leaving them in charge. Not to pillage his vineyard, but to bring about a harvest in which the landowner could expect to share. It's his vineyard after all and the tenants are just that – tenants. They lease the place and therefore have a duty of care for it, and owe a share in the harvest. Again, this is exactly the same as the creation story at the start of the bible. Literal or not, it doesn't matter, God places Adam and Eve in the garden and expects them to tend it and bring order from it – to encourage it to flourish even as they themselves flourished by farming it.

However, we know the story, Adam and Eve decided they knew better; just as the tenants in Jesus' story. Adam and Eve rejected God's way, and the rest of the story of the first part of the bible is the story of people rejecting God's way and persecuting those prophets God sent to try to bring them back to himself. So it is with Jesus' story – the landowner sends his servants to collect the harvest, but they were beaten and killed. No matter how many servants he sent, there was the same result.

Finally the landowner sends his Son. Surely they will respect him? But the tenants saw the son and said to themselves 'This is the heir; come let us kill him and get his inheritance.' This brings the story of history up to date. The people of Israel had consistently rejected God's servants, the prophets, and now they were rejecting Jesus, God's Son. And Jesus' story doesn't say that there was an issue of mistaken identity or that they weren't sure if the son had authority, but simply centres on the greed of the tenants. By killing the son, they could claim his inheritance. We've all watched enough murder mysteries on TV to know that that logic is crackers – no-one gets to claim inheritance that they won through murder, but the key thing here is that it chimes back with the whole history of humanity: all through the bible story from creation, to Babel, to Israel's national history itself, mankind has tried to make himself God in his own eyes. He has tried to claim that which is rightfully God's – whether that be by eating forbidden apples, building ginormous towers, getting themselves a King, choosing to make fake God's who they could control and adopting them, and so on. Then stealing of the inheritance is just another farcical attempt to wrestle God's world from him.

The tenants kill the landowner's son. And soon after Jesus tells this story, the Jews kill him too, God's son in verse 39. So Jesus asks those around him what the landowner will do in response, and the Chief Priests and Elders answer that the tenants should come to a sticky end and the vineyard be given to others who will produce a harvest and give the landowner his dues.

Just like last week, the simple answer is laid out and like a hammer-blow, the Jewish leaders have managed to condemn themselves. For rejecting the prophets and for rejecting Jesus, they have unwittingly passed sentence. Interestingly, there is a difference between the punishment that the Jewish leaders would mete out in verse 41 and that which Jesus declares in verse 43. The one recommended by the Chief Priests and Elders is gruesome and vengeful whereas God's punishment is simply a removal of a place in God's Kingdom – which I guess is to be expected if you go about rejecting and killing his son!

Importantly, there's the slightly odd quotes in verses 42 and 44 which are a little obscure but refer to incidents and writings in the first part of the bible concerning judgement. I haven't time to go into it, but basically, they make clear that Jesus is the one who gets to judge this matter, not us. Effectively what's being said is that the Jewish leaders have condemned themselves, but Jesus, who they have rejected, has become the lynchpin in God's plan for the world and he will judge, not the Jews, and not us, what is the right way to deal with the situation.

Which brings us to the last couple of verses. No wonder the chief priests were angry. They had just been removed from their position as judges and condemned as those who deserved a terrible sticky end by their own words. The Jesus they have rejected has become their judge and their treasured status as God's special people has been taken away from them and given to someone else. Talk about having a bad day! No wonder they wanted to silence Jesus.

If we stop there, we end up pointing our fingers at the terrible Jews who did this terrible crime and feeling good about ourselves. The fact is that the kingdom of God, in verse 43 is taken from the Jews and given to a new people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom. This new people is the Church – all those who believe in Jesus and follow him. We are the new people who take on the vineyard from the landowner. It is a bit too easy to live comfortably, pointing the finger at those people who have done things wrong and in doing so, feel better about ourselves. This passage, throughout history has been used as justification for terrible acts of anti-semitism, of anti-Jewishness. We must remember that the judgement is Jesus's, not ours. He is the cornerstone, the judge, the centre of all that we think about in our faith. It's not about us, but about Jesus.

But that's not the end of it either. Jesus doesn't just say that the kingdom of God, the vineyard, has been taken away from the Jews and given to the church. Instead, the kingdom has been given to a new people who produce the fruits of the kingdom. If you like, as Christians, we are on the same tenancy agreement as the Jews were. There is an expectation of being good workers and good tenants in God's vineyard. As a church, we are expected to produce the fruit of God's Kingdom. It's not some sort of birthright, but it is a leasing arrangement. So if we find ourselves sitting pointing our fingers at the Jewish people of history, beware – we are no different to them. There is a veiled warning in this. Just as Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden of Eden, and just as the Jewish leaders were removed from God's Kingdom – do we honestly think we are any safer than they were? If we just play around at being Christian people, going through the odd ritual and saying the right things when we are expected to; do we believe this is the same as being good workers in God's Kingdom bringing in the fruits of the kingdom at the right time?

As I said last week, all these stories that Jesus tells at this point in Matthew's gospel are leading up to the end of chapter 22 where he says that our first love must be utterly for God – heart, soul, mind and strength. The bad tenants kept the harvest for themselves. They made themselves into gods and didn't accept the true authority of the true God over them. I wonder if that might be true of us too?

God's Kingdom, doesn't run by birthright as the Jews found, and it doesn't run by correct liturgy or church attendance either. God's Kingdom is made up of those who seek to love Jesus with their whole body, heart, soul and mind and who love their neighbour as themselves. This actually doesn't exclude anyone, and so as Christians, we have two reasons not to get anti-semitic: there are people of Israel in God's kingdom, and also we are only leaseholders too. No-one is excluded from the chance to be a good tenant in God's kingdom.

The big question is, "do we exclude ourselves?". And that's a question for all of us. It's an invitation to take a long, hard look at ourselves and ask if we are putting Jesus first, loving our neighbours and working for God's harvest. The Jews were tasked with being a light to the nations so that through them the world could see God and come to follow him. We have the same task. As individuals and as a church, are we seeking God first and seeking to be a light to those around us, to bring them into God's kingdom?

Or are we keeping the harvest to ourselves? Are we hiding our faith, ashamed of our landowner? Are we hiding the light within us in case others might find it annoying? Are we waiting for others to bring in the grain? Are we limiting which parts of our life and our activities we do for the glory of God?

And if we haven't yet decided to become a follower of Jesus, now is the time. Christian faith isn't a hypocritical birthright or a cultural thing. It's a living faith in Jesus, despite our failings, and a change of direction to stop serving ourselves and instead following the lead of the one person who holds all of history's story together, from creation all the way to today. If you aren't there yet, please come and talk to me after – I'd love to show you the way.

Amen.