

Sermon 26th March 2023 Luke 20: 9-19

Our parable today is, perhaps, not as straight forward as other' but the word of God is alive and active and I believe it still has much to say to us today.

So, let us pray. Father, will you please send your Holy Spirit to help us understand, for we long to hear from you.

Let's start with where this parable lies in Jesus's time-line

It comes after Jesus's triumphant ride into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday as recorded in the previous chapter, Luke 19. Jesus then enters the temple and turns the tables of the money changers, in righteous anger, which disrupts the ability to offer sacrifices at the sacred temple. This was radical, outrageous behaviour that seriously annoyed the temple leaders, who already had Jesus on their radar.

At the beginning of Chapter 20, we see the approach of a delegation of 'chief priests, and the scribes **and** the elders. The Sanhedrin, that ran the temple were composed of 3 sorts of people and the presence of all three indicates the seriousness of their concerns. They approached Jesus and wanted to know by what authority he presumed to do these things. Jesus responded to their question with a question of his own, which they declined to answer. The debate closed, with Jesus replying. Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

He will not answer their question as to the source of his authority, but he will tell them a story.

The story he tells, answers their questions indirectly. And this is the parable we're considering today.

This parable has often been called 'the parable of the tenants' or the 'parable of the wicked vinedressers.' Making the story linear and climaxing at the death of the wicked tenants.

But Ken Bailey, the author and theologian gives a different perspective and suggests that the decision made by the owner of the vineyard in line 5 is huge and that decision is indeed the climax of the parable.

Let's look at the outline of the parable

Line 1 - There is the introduction to the story - A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time.

In Lines 2-4 the story builds with a well constructed rhythm

Each begins with someone 'sent' to the vineyard and closes with the same messenger being 'sent away'.

Each messenger is treated badly, but with each line their treatment become more and more harsh.

Line 5 -We sense a painful pause, where the master says, 'What shall I do? '

As successive servants are cast out with increasing violence and insult, we would expect the response of the owner to send a heavily armed company of trained men to storm the vineyard, arrest the violent men and bring them to justice. The owner must have been angry at the injustice and suffering of his servants. But see what he will do with his anger.

In the owner's frustration, pain, anguish, rejection, desire for retributive justice, he reprocesses his anger into grace. He reaches out to the tenants with a sign of reconciliation, even though he knows it may be costly. And he decided to send his beloved son.

And to the amazement of the reader, the son is sent alone and unarmed.

When Esau went to meet Jacob, looking for reconciliation, he took 400 armed men. Here the son went alone.

This is the focus of our parable. The reaching out of the vineyard owner by sending his son.

Line 6 – the story tumbles down , the son is killed

Line 7 – judgment comes. And the vineyard gets new tenants.

It is the decision of the vineyard owner that is the climax of this parable, which is why Ken Bailey calls this parable The parable of the Noble Vineyard Owner and His Son.

Let's take a closer look at what was going on here.

A story about a vineyard would have been familiar to those listening to Jesus.

In Isaiah 5, the owner, who represented God, dug and prepared a vineyard and planted it with choice vines (who were the people of Judah), but the vines yielded only bad grapes. God expected good grapes – the good grapes of justice and righteousness, but instead they yielded wild grapes of bloodshed and pain. And the response was, that the vineyard would be destroyed. And indeed, Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people of Judah taken into exile.

In the parable told by Jesus in Luke, the owner of the vineyard represents God, and the vineyard represents Israel. He rents it out to the tenants who represent Israel's leaders. Although there would have been a harvest, all we hear about is bloodshed and death, and the result is the tenants are replaced.

So, Jesus, subtly alters the Isaiah parable and no wonder the leaders, the chief priests, scribes and elders were angry – They would recognise that Jesus was talking about them.

But the parable of Jesus also includes verse 13 'Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will **respect** him.' Jesus is telling an autobiographical story about himself.

The vineyard owner hopes that the violent men will sense the indescribable graciousness and generosity, of the owner, who sends his beloved son, alone and unarmed, into the vineyard. The story implies that if the renters accept the authority of the son and pay their rent, amnesty will apply and they will not be destroyed.

Not a chance, I hear you say! – why on earth would the tenants treat the son any differently? The act of the vineyard owner seems foolish, indeed reckless.

The owner's unbelievable decision, is truly earth shaking and deserves closer consideration.

You see, what is transpiring in the story at this point is deeper and more profound than just a question of respect. The word respect here is better translated, feel shame in his presence.

The owner is acting out of real nobility, and he profoundly hopes that his choice of total vulnerability will awaken a long-forgotten sense of honour in their hearts. The costly path of total vulnerability has the power to be as life renewing. Retaliation is not the only way. Indeed the violent option would have trigger further violence.

He is willing to take this risk. His servants have already been beaten and wounded, yet he will risk an even greater loss.

When Jesus uses the phrase 'my beloved son' the thoughts of the temple rulers would have been taken back to Isaiah 42 here is my son, whom I love, my chosen one in whom I delight. Referring to the future Messiah. The onlookers too will remember God speaking at Jesus' baptism ' **This is my Son, whom I love;** with him I am well pleased' and God speaking at Jesus' transfiguration - This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. **Listen to him!**'

Verse 13 is the climax – God giving the tenants, the temple leaders and us, the choice to reflect on who God is, and who his son is and where he gets his authority. This is how far God is prepared to go, to stop the violence, to stop the rebellion, to stop greed and self-centredness and bring us back to himself – the source of all love and life.

The owners question what shall I do? And the costly action sends the ball into the court of the tenants. Who, on seeing his son, would have asked the same question to themselves? What shall we do? And their answer seems inevitable. As they say 'This is the heir. Let's kill him. That the inheritance may be ours.' And they cast him out of the vineyard and kill him.

In those times, Jewish law said that if tenant held land for a full 3 years it would be theirs, they would own it. Their eyes were fixed on personal gain and they had lost all sight of any honour. And the result is the murder of the vineyards owner's son.

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? [pause]¹⁶ He will come and kill them and give the vineyard to others. Time and time again, the prophets of Israel spoke about the coming destruction of the nation. In the song of the Vineyard, Isaiah predicted the destruction of the vineyard long before Jerusalem fell. In the parable. It is the renters who are the problem, not the vineyard. Here Jesus is prophesying directly against the Temple leadership. Not against the nation, which deserved better shepherds.

So, we hear in our reading the response of the temple leaders who say 'God forbid'. They completely understood the parallel Jesus was making between Isaiah's vineyard and the story he was telling them.

But Jesus wasn't done yet... in our reading it continues with Jesus quoting Psalm 118

Psalm 118 talks about the triumphant entrance, the cries of Hosanna , the waving of branches,... paralleling Jesus' triumphant entrance on that first Palm Sunday.

And in the middle of Psalm 118 are the words Jesus used..

The stone the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone.

Just in case the leaders hadn't understood the parable he hits them again with the reality that they are about to kill the cornerstone, the saviour of the world. The cornerstone is Jesus and he has been rejected by the builders, the temple leaders, but will become the cornerstone, the saviour. He was warning them that they were rejecting the Messiah, the son of God, the one true God...

And then, if that's not enough, he quotes Isaiah 8 at them:

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

He had offered grace. God longs for us to know our true inheritance, to stop holding on to earthly power which is blind to the love and grace of God and his kingdom. But to those who reject him, they will receive judgement. It won't be long until Jesus is tried, flogged, and crucified. God who came in utter vulnerability as a baby., was soon to be killed. The incarnation is affirmed and the cross foreseen.

The short-term results of the offer of love, is the death of the son. The parable however should stimulate our minds to reflect on the long-term effects of the self-emptying act of the owner and his beloved son.

The vineyard owners decision to send his son may have seemed foolish but remember Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 1:18 *'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'*

So there we have it, another fascinating parable and as I come to a close, let me draw out **three** things for us to ponder on, afresh this morning.

1. We see the great **Reprocessing of Anger into Grace.**

The vineyard owner does not respond to the renters with force or violence. Rather, he chooses incarnation with its total vulnerability. To do this, he must re process his anger into a costly demonstration of unexpected love and grace. This implies forgiveness for those who accept his offer of love.

As we journey through Lent, let us reflect on the sacrifice Jesus made and the sins in us, that he has forgiven. Let us ponder on how God reprocessed his anger into grace. Where is it that we need to do the same today? Are you harbouring anger against anyone? How can you change that anger into grace?

2. God calls us to **Respect his Son**

Jesus is not interested in possessing or controlling the land or the temple made with hands. But he does call us to respect, to honour him and revere his authority. To choose his path, to seek his ways. To make him our cornerstone, as we pray 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.' Do we respect Jesus and his authority.

3. **Remember, Judgement is real.**

Judgement in this parable focuses on the temple leaders and their demise. Grace is free and abounding. But as in other parables. Judgement does not evaporate as a result. There are consequences for those who reject Jesus. As we reflect on our own sins and turn to Jesus for forgiveness freely given, let us lift up those we know that don't know Jesus and pray for a revelation, a softening of heart and an acceptance of his amazing grace freely offered.

Let us pray...