

God's vineyard.

Our Old Testament reading, the Song of the Vineyard, would have been well known to Jesus' listeners when he shared the parable we've heard in our gospel reading – the parable – sometimes known as the parable of the vineyard or the parable of the tenants or even the parable of the wicked tenants, the parable which Jesus told in the last week before he was crucified. You might remember that on the Sunday, which we remember as Palm Sunday, Jesus had finally entered Jerusalem, and each day of that week, he went to the temple courts to teach.

The people came to listen to him, as they had throughout his ministry. Jesus' teaching was well received by the people, at least most of the people, most of the time. He taught in a way the people could understand – he told stories that people could relate to – stories about travelling, families, farming, masonry, baking, shepherding, growing grapes and making wine. But to be fair, some of the people that came to listen to Jesus that week were probably hoping to see another confrontation between Jesus and the Temple authorities, because there were a few of those confrontations...

And it's against that background that Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard.

In the middle of Matthew 21, in verse 23, we read that Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"

And there's an exchange between Jesus and the chief priests and the elders, which ends with Jesus saying, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." – and going on to tell two parables – the parable of two sons and today's parable, the parable of the tenants.

So this parable, is directed to the chief priests and elders – the religious authorities, the leaders of the Israel. So, as I said, they would have been familiar with the song of the vineyard. And the last verse of that song, would have given them a particularly clear view of the parable that Jesus tells:

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress. (Isaiah 5:7)

Sometimes people say that Jesus spoke in parables so that his meaning would not be clear to those who were not his followers – perhaps, but sometimes he spoke in parables that made his meaning perfectly clear to those who opposed him as well.

Two weeks ago we contemplated the parable of the worker's in the vineyard from chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel, in which the landowner recruited day-labourers to work in his vineyard, and that was a common way to work the land.

But the renting of land to tenant farmers was also a common practice in Judea in the first century – and across much of the world for much of history. Landowners would enter into arrangements with tenants which would require the tenants to turn over share of the harvest (21:34). Those who failed to meet the landowner's standards would be evicted – quite possibly forcibly – and finding new tenants to farm the land would have been fairly easy for the landowner.

Jesus' original listeners would have been familiar with this arrangement – probably some even had first-hand experience of it.

The vineyard of the parable had been prepared by the landowner - he put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. (21:33) – details which shows how well the land had been

prepared – but details that also link back the Song of the Vineyard from Isaiah 5 – a wall, a watchtower and a winepress. The landowner found some tenant farmers to grow grapes, harvest them, and then he moved to another place.

With the landowner gone, the tenant farmers were left to maintain the vineyard – their obligation was to pay the landowner a portion of what the vineyard produced.

At harvest-time the landowner sent his servants to the vineyard to collect his share of the produce, but as we heard “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third”.

You might think that the landowner would have evicted them – and taken action against them – straight away. But the landowner was patient – and extraordinarily forgiving – and sent more servants to get his share of the harvest.

As always, as we read Jesus’ parables we need to remember that they’re not accounts of historical events – they’re used to illustrate points. The characters and events in them are larger-than-life – they are hyperbolae. They are not true in the sense of being factually true, but they reveal truth – truth about God, and truth about ourselves.

Sure enough, the second wave of servants that the landowner sends in this parable meets the same fate as the first – beating, killing and stoning.

Surely by now the owner would send in some hired soldiers to claim his property! But no, instead he sends his son. Surely, the tenants who have attacked the two groups of servants, will show appropriate respect to the landowner’s own son! Surely.

In a foolish decision, the tenants reason that if they kill the son, they will get the son’s inheritance. Not only do they not want to give the owner of the vineyard his fair share of the fruit, but they want the whole vineyard for themselves.

The landowner couldn’t have done more for the tenants – as the Song of the Vineyard asks, “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?” The landowner has acted fairly and faithfully, but the tenants had only turned against him in response.

Jesus asks his audience (the chief priests and elders), “...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

Well, they would have remembered the Song of the Vineyard

Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:

I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed;

I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.

I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there.

I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel... (Isiah 5:5-7a)

Jesus asks, “...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

The answer is obvious, and the temple leaders (I like to imagine with red faces) answer “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end [...] and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time .” (verse 41).

There's no reason to think that the religious leaders in any way didn't understand what Jesus was telling them with this parable, particularly with their knowledge of the Song of the Vineyard. The landowner is God. The vineyard is the nation of Israel. The tenants are the leaders of the nation – those chosen to lead the nation on behalf of God.

In fact, just as the tenants had failed to honour the landowner in giving a share of the harvest, the religious leaders failed to honour God. Instead of honouring God, they kept the honour for themselves – you could fairly say that they put themselves into God's place.

It is clear to us that the vineyard owner is God the Father and Jesus is his only son. Jesus is effectively telling the leaders, just as your ancestors ignored or opposed God's prophets, and failed to honour God, I know you oppose me, and are plotting to kill me.

Jesus spells it out for them, quoting Psalm 118:22,23:

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'?"

Jesus tells them that just as the landowner would ultimately take the vineyard from the selfish tenants, they could expect to be treated the same way by God, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

The chapter concludes with Matthew telling us "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet."

By the end of the week, Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, he'd been tried and beaten, sentenced to death, and raised up on the cross. By the end of the week, the tenants would have killed the landowner's son.

For a time, it would seem that the religious leaders had won. But, as those religious leaders had said – the landowner would bring those wretches to a wretched end... and he would rent the vineyard to other tenants, who would give him his share of the crop at harvest time.

Forty odd years later, in the third year of the Jewish revolution against the Romans, three days before Passover, when nearly a million people were in the city, the Roman leader Titus took decisive action against the rebellious Jews: he began a siege of Jerusalem. Four months later, the siege ended, with the destruction of the temple and the enslavement – or murder – of everyone who remained in the city... although it seems that many had escaped by then.

With the loss of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, the religious leaders were evicted. Their occupation of the God's vineyard was over, and their power was gone.

No longer would God's vineyard be the claimed sole property of those religious leaders. No longer would their selective reading of the Old Testament prophecies give the nation of Israel exclusive access to God.

In answering Jesus' question "...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (21:40), the chief priests and the pharisees had prophesied exactly what would happen – He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time (21:41)

With Jesus' death on the cross at Calvary, it seemed for a time that the ungrateful tenants had prevailed. But on the third day, Jesus rose from the grave – the risen son claimed the vineyard. Those

who had rejected him, those who had failed to honour the landowner, had no claim on the vineyard and no place in it.

Instead, the vineyard of God's kingdom would be open to all who would choose to trust in Jesus – those who would honour him, those who would produce good fruit on his behalf.

Which is, of course, good news. We can listen to the song of the vineyard, and we can listen to this parable and we can be reminded of how the religious authorities of Jesus' time had gone wrong, and we can be glad the religious leaders of our own time don't get the same things wrong – and put themselves in the place of God, can't we? Well, we can hope, but I think that our own experience is that people do get these things wrong.

One of the things we learn from how this parable is presented is that understanding what Jesus teaches is not enough. Clearly, the chief priests and the pharisees understood this parable. They understood that God was the landowner. The servants were prophets. The son was Jesus. They understood – and they could even say how the parable would end... But despite understanding, their response wasn't to turn to Jesus, their response wasn't to honour God, it was to try to get rid of Jesus. Even though they understood.

Understanding what Jesus teaches is not enough. We read the bible, we listen to sermons, we go to bible studies to learn, don't we? To understand. To know God better. To know Jesus better. To know the scriptures better. But you know who knew the scriptures well? The scribes and the pharisees.

Certainly, we need to understand – to grow in our knowledge and love of God – but we also need to act in response to that understanding. We can't truly grow in the knowledge and love of God without that knowledge and love changing us.

Remember what Jesus said near the end of this parable: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." In short, the countless gifts and the grace of God will be poured into the lives of those who know his love and whose lives reflect that love.

And we need to honour God in response to his grace to us. While we may not be as blatant in our disregard for God the religious leaders of Jesus' time, the temptation – if not actual act – is strong within us to put ourselves into God's place, to make our own judgements, and, to trust ourselves.

Today's parable serves as a warning to us. A warning about not honouring God. A warning about keeping what is rightfully God's for ourselves. We mustn't be like those tenants who kept the vineyard for themselves. We mustn't be like those who refused to give to the landowner what was rightfully the landowner's. We mustn't be like those tenants who beat and stoned and murdered the landowners' servants. Don't be the ones who reject the landowner's son.

It's a dire warning, and one which the religious leaders understood, but failed to heed.

But as well as that warning, this parable also gives us hope. Those that exploit their position will be dealt with. Those who claim what is God's as their own will be dealt with.

And the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Jesus, who was rejected by those who claimed to be the leaders of God's chosen people, in his death and resurrection opened God's vineyard, God's kingdom, to all who trust in him.

Amen.