

THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

Philippians 3:4b-14

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21:33-46

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. “The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

“But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” “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.”

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’? “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. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.”

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.

Bible Reflection

I wonder, how are you? Life is a bit challenging at the moment for most of us. The coronavirus pandemic is causing a lot of disruption to many people's lives. There are various forms of lockdowns, with numerous different regulations, and staff, employees and students at businesses, hospitals, schools, and universities, are having to adjust their routines. Many people are worried about catching the virus and so they are self-isolating. Many people are worried about the threat of unemployment, or not being able to pay their mortgage or rent. On top of all this, there are problems caused by climate change with floods, droughts, and poor harvests. Then of course, there is also Brexit! No wonder so many people are feeling despondent.

Let me read you a report...

Judgement, like a black thunder cloud, hangs in the air. A whole society, an economic system which has had a few good years, is in imminent danger of collapse and is being weighed in the balance. It's a system that has relied on rewarding the rich while largely ignoring the poor. Perhaps now the harvest will be reaped. What will the future hold?

Sound familiar? It's a description of Jerusalem in Jesus' time, and any resemblance to persons or situations of the twenty-first century are entirely coincidental, as they say....

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He rode in like a king, hailed by his followers. He symbolically and prophetically enacted the overthrow of the Temple and its economic system. And for the next few days he taught in the same Temple. The authorities didn't dare touch him for fear of what the crowd might do (Matt. 21.1-32).

His message was one of judgement on the city, especially the Temple. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the Temple had gone, destroyed by the Romans in AD70. It would never rise again, and Christians like Matthew saw its fall as a vindication of Jesus' prophecies of God's judgement.

What were the grounds of Jesus' accusation against the Temple? Well, it seems, that its leaders had lost sight of God. Today's parable of the vineyard puts it most succinctly. The tenants, who stand for Israel's leaders, are concerned with their own profit, not that of the owner of the vineyard. Their cynicism reaches its peak when they decide that, if they kill the heir, the vineyard will be theirs (Matt. 21.38-39), implying that they neither respect nor fear the owner himself.

Jesus' criticism of the Temple when he entered it was that it had become 'a cave of robbers' (Matt. 21.13; Mark 11.17; Luke 19.46). The most obvious application of this phrase (drawn from Jer. 7.11) was to the priests who ran the Temple, and to the Herod family, who had rebuilt it. The 'cave of robbers' means a bandits' hideout, where they store their spoils after raids. The Temple, like all ancient temples, was also a bank, a safe place to store money and valuables. Herod the Great and his sons had spent a great deal on the rebuilding of the Temple, but in doing so they had also made a secure treasury for themselves. The biggest robbers of all were now in charge and storing their loot under cover of God's protection in the Temple.

What would happen next? The parable suggests that in the prophets they have already had plenty of warning. Now, in Jesus, they have a final chance. But if they reject him, what then will the owner do to his beautiful vineyard which they have tried to take from him?

The parable is clearly aimed at those in authority, not the Jewish people as a whole, many of whom suffered from the robbers who ran the Temple. The prophets had warned in the past of what would happen to those who did not protect the poor, the widow and the orphan as God desired. Now the Son had come with the same message. And it had made no difference.

Do you remember the story of when Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth? In Luke 4 we read that Jesus was in the synagogue and he was handed a scroll and he read from the prophet Isaiah – ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

God wants us to love him, and to love our neighbour, no matter who they are – rich or poor, black or white, young or old, Prime Minister or unemployed single mum. We can only do that if we become more Christ-like. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, we should consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus. So let us press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenwards in Jesus. As we heard in today’s Collect, ‘our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God’.

In John’s gospel Jesus said to his disciples, and he says to us, ‘I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!’ (John 16:33) Jesus wants us to know that he is with us in whatever we face. We can enjoy that real sense of peace despite what may be going on around us. Our hearts can only find real rest when we put our trust in God. So let us fill our hearts with hope and reach out to our neighbours with God’s love.

If we are not prepared to do that, then we need to heed the warning that Jesus gave in today’s gospel reading – ‘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’ (Matt 21:43).

Let us pray...

Father God, thank you for the gift of relationship and community. We pray this crisis will bring people together, not drive them apart. For those of us who are anxious, bring peace. For those of us who are sick, bring healing. For those of us caring for others, bring strength. For those of us who are lonely, bring comfort. For those of us who are not lonely, help us to see those who are, and help us reach out to them in whatever ways we can. We pray that this crisis will bring about renewed trust in your goodness. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen. *Frank*