Matthew 21:33 to 46. Preached on 4th October 2026

Theme: - The wicked tenants.

Our reading starts, “Listen to another parable,” He said that because he had just finished telling them two other parables, the parable of the fig tree and the parable of the two sons, Jesus used parables to make people think about what he was saying. This parable is also one of the only three parables that are in all the three synoptic gospels. The others are the parable of the Sower and the parable of the Mustard Seed both in chapter 13, such was the importance of them to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Now a parable in the Bible is a short story that uses everyday situations to teach a spiritual or moral lesson, often revealing truths about God’s kingdom some of which are difficult to understand, hence making us think about them.

But this Parable of the wicked tenants is representational, which is a story in which each of the elements, such as the people, places, and things, have a hidden or symbolic meaning. Now I’m sure that everyone has seen the similarity between our reading from Isaiah chapter 5 and Matthew 21 both of which speak about a man and his vineyard, indeed Jesus used the framework of Isaiah’s parable for the basis of his parable, but Jesus’s objective was different to Isaiah’s objective.

Isaiah’s objective was to point out that while God, in his love for Judah, had done everything possible for them; in return God had then expected a land of justice and righteousness, but what he got was bloodshed and a cry of anguish from the people. Whereas Jesus’ objective in Matthew chapter 21 was to address the chief priests and Pharisees’ challenge to his authority and to tell them a parable which would expose their refusal to repent and listen to him, and their ultimate rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

In this parable from Matthew’s gospel the landowner is God who planted a vineyard, now most vineyards wouldn’t have a fence around it nor for that matter a watchtower, so, this was a special vineyard that had been made secure from wild animals or robbers. Now this vineyard represents the nation of Israel, and the tenants are the people of Israel, or more accurately the religious leaders of Israel. The landowner’s servants or slaves are the prophets of Israel, and of course the landowner’s son is Jesus.

Once we understand the code, the meaning of the parable becomes clear: God established a covenant with Israel which translates to the landowner planting a vineyard. God sent his prophets to Israel, people who were believed to speak for God, share sacred messages with the people, who in this parable were the landowner’s servants and slaves. And finally, God sent his Son Jesus whom the tenants, the Israelite leaders, crucified with the help of the Romans.

So, while this parable tells us a lot about the Israelite leaders in Jesus’ day, it also tells us a lot about God. In this parable the owner ‘God’ left the tenants to manage the vineyard without his help or interference. In fact, we are told that he went to another country verse 33. That’s how God works, in partnership with us, he doesn’t interfere with our lives unless we ask him to help us, and then he is only too pleased to help. My three adult children have their own lives to live, and I don’t interfere unless one of them asks for my help or advice, indeed the worse thing we can do is offer our advice to our adult children when they haven’t

asked for it, a lesson I took a long time to learn, but we who love our children want the best for them.

God also shows considerable patience in that he sent messenger after messenger; and we can see that throughout the Old Testament where God sent prophet after prophet and finally sent his Son. God has also given us a beautiful world with everything in it that we need to live peaceful, creative, and productive lives, as indeed he gave those tenants a vineyard with everything they needed, to produce the best wine.

In verse 40 and 41 we read, "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death.'" Now Matthew may have written his gospel at about the same time as the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70 which would have made a huge impression on him. Now although Matthew didn't mention it, he may have connected AD 70 with Jesus' words as recorded in verse 41 of our reading; "He will put those wretches to a miserable death.".

The second part of verse 41 reads, "And lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time." The other tenants are now of course the Christian church worldwide, who will give him the fruit in due season, which is people who believe in Jesus' teaching, accepts him as God's Son and as our saviour, and who try to live according to his example.

Turning now to verse 42 which reads, "Jesus said to them. "Have you never read in the scripture:" 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'" "This was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." In my Bible there is an alternative word for cornerstone and it's 'Keystone'. Now a keystone in a humped back bridge is the very centre stone of the arch, and it is this stone that keeps the whole bridge from falling down.

The rejected cornerstone or keystone is the crucified Christ, who will become the cornerstone or keystone of God's new covenant with the whole of mankind ensuring it's everlasting future. Now a builder will build the corners of a building first and then fill in the rest afterwards; that ensures that the building is built to the designers specification, and indeed Jesus as the cornerstone ensures that his church truly represents God's will. In Isaiah chapter 28 verse 16 Isaiah wrote, "Therefore says the Lord God, see I am laying in Zion a foundation stone. A tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: One who will not panic." Or as St Paul wrote to the Ephesians chapter 2 verse 19, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone." That also means that we can turn to Christ at any time day or night, because he is the cornerstone of our faith, always available in our hearts.

In verse 43 Jesus harps back to the parable of the wicked tenants but here he tells them that the vineyard has been upgraded to the kingdom of God, and that the kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom. God is looking for people who will bring forth fruit. You may ask what kind of fruit? The answer is holy lives; lives lived in accordance with God's will. God won't judge us based on the work we do in or for the church, or on the number of services we attended. He will count us as faithful if we have been faithful.

When John the Baptist was baptising in the river Jordan, he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor.’ Nor must we assume that we will be saved because we call Jesus Lord, Lord, but do not do what he requires of us. Luke chapter 6 verse 46. God is looking for people who will bring forth Holy lives, lives lived in accord with God’s will.

We are told that the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls. A good illustration of the meaning of this sentence is a military one; ‘They fell upon the enemy and destroyed them’. Verse 44 warns us that the cornerstone becomes a stumbling block for the unfaithful. So also, the person who fails to live according to God’s will, can find themselves crushed by God’s power. Cornerstones were first mentioned in the old testament, and all these cornerstones are now summed up in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation stone on which everything is built, and the cornerstone that holds everything together. To refuse his way is to bang ones head against the walls of the law of God. To defy him is in the end to be crushed.

Verse 45 reads, When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables (Plural), they realised that he was speaking about them. The two parables that the chief priests and the Pharisees realised were about them were the parable of the two sons, the one where one son said he wouldn’t go to the vineyard but did, and the other who said he would go to the vineyard but didn’t. The second parable is the wicked tenants, which I have already said are the religious leaders of Israel who knew they had to rule with Justice and compassion, but instead failed to do so; like the son who said he would go but didn’t.

But after the crucifixion they must have then realised that Jesus was also speaking about himself, because he openly and clearly told them that he was the Son of God, when he said he was the Son of the landowner who was killed by the tenants. However, I’m sure there were many Sadducees and Pharisees such as Nicodemus who did come to believe that Jesus was the Christ the Son of God, and it is never too late to turn to God and ask for his forgiveness.

Now the Pharisees and the Sadducees wanted to arrest Jesus, but they didn’t have the courage because the people thought he was a prophet sent from God. Here in verse 46 is an example of the powerless defeating the powerful because God was on the side of the powerless, and with God all things are possible.

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