

# **Sermon: Knox Church Christchurch Sunday 8 October, 2023 Pentecost 19**

## **Bible Readings**

Isaiah 5: 1-7 The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard

Matthew 21: 33-46 The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

**Sermon** *followed by time for reflection.*

*A Tale of the Vineyards*

We pray: O God open to us your word from scripture – may we hear your truth for us and take it into our hearts and minds, forever changed, forever challenged, forever encouraged. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

When we as a family were living in North Canterbury, in Amberley, we watched in some wonder as the number of vineyards grew and grew. And, personally, I didn't know whether to be awed at their symmetry and immensity or annoyed at their soullessness and their seeming to take over the beautiful rural country side. In all truth – what I thought didn't matter – they were there and they were not going away. And they have proved their worth, I suspect.

I imagine that the vineyards of biblical times would have been much less soulless. In fact, they would have been a place of community and activity as well as the sense of being embedded naturally in the landscape for all time. They would have been a place of belonging and sustenance for many – small wonder that the vineyard and its vines are the source of so many parables, laments stories and metaphors in the bible. We have two of those vineyard stories today.

From Isaiah we have a God who is perplexed and weeping over the destruction of his vineyard, of Israel. A vineyard planted with all tenderness, nurtured with love, all the supports put in place, but despite the preparation and the care, the vineyard turns toxic - producing thorns and briars – ruin and destruction because of the unfaithfulness of its people.

Jesus draws on this lament from the Hebrew Scriptures when he paints a picture of the state of affairs for the people of his time. He shares the parable of the wicked tenants who look after the vineyard, and it is one of the more bloodthirsty tales, graphic in both its content and challenge. Innocent people killed and greed and power prevailing. It could so easily be of today – it fits into our violent, careless world only too well.

The parable of the wicked tenants has an obvious and pointed message – the religious authorities of the time refused to recognise either the prophets of God or the son of God. In their surety of right power, they were oblivious to the presence of God among them. Israel had rejected the one who built the vineyard for them.

John Calvin, writing 500 years ago, certainly saw the significance of this parable for his time – and identified two main points that a church of any time should consider:

One is that we as a church are to expect rejection, not just from people outside the church but also, from those within, from religious leaders who are supposedly faithful to God but who in fact completely reject the one who is to be the cornerstone of their church and go their own way.

Secondly, Calvin reminds us that, whatever contrivances are mounted against the church from inside or from without, God will prevail.

Let us think about the first of these propositions – that of rejection. So what exactly is being rejected? Not, says Jesus, the scriptures or a system of ideas or propositions, for they sit well with the incumbents, but rather the cornerstone, the person of Jesus. The tenants did not kill an idea, a principle or a system of doctrine, they killed the landowner's son! The gospel comes to us as a person, and that person was rejected.

As an allegory, this parable demands of us, the reader, to not just figure out who each of the characters represents for the time, but to dig down deep enough to find our place in the story, to examine our possible culpability as well.

The first thing that strikes me is the loving care taken in the establishment of the vineyard – of God's attention to detail and nourishment of the vines – both for Israel and for the church of today, God's love, hope and trust in us, the people of God, is palpable. The next is how well it goes for a while – while it is still a time of close remembrance of what God has done for us, while the lessons are sharp and the teachings are bright in our lives, the vineyard thrives.

But then we settle down, get comfortable, familiar with our surroundings, surer of our ability to do the right thing, more reliant on the rules forged for a purpose and put aside remembering that purpose. We end up just that bit detached from that urgency and clarity that weighs this new thing.

I'm sure that this process of settling in, smoothing off the rough edges, finding our groove has a name in today's labelled world, but nonetheless, it is a thing. We've got a handle on what we need to do, who we need to be. Follow the rules and form a committee sort of thing. We're on the right track, pretty much.

But this is a very dangerous place to be. Especially because it doesn't feel like it. We and our predecessors have worked hard at methods of right living, of being faithful, righteous, kind and humble. We have written zillions of miles of tracts and dogmas and doctrines and theological treatises all genuinely aimed at knowing God as the people of God. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, much right with it.

But there is a secret ingredient that keeps us on our toes and all too often goes missing. When we don't have it, it becomes so much easier to bend those words of faith to things that are no longer of God. Just as the leaders of the temple had lost sight of the purpose and presence of God in their blindness and rigid rules, so too, we are able to make decisions and act in ways which are absolutely at cross purposes with the teachings of Jesus and the faithful love of God for all people.

We find ways to theologically justify excluding people from our community; LGBTQ currently, women previously, colour consistently, other faiths insistently. When we do this, we have forgotten who we are. The one who welcomes all, especially the marginal and disempowered.

This missing factor also allows us to be comfortable, to assure ourselves that it's okay to give out of our surplus, to be generous whilst still keeping control of where that generosity is given, to withhold our skills if we are feeling a bit scared of where they might lead us to.

And in the end, as the people of Israel discovered, it diminishes our opportunities to see God standing in front of us. We are not alert for possibilities of God being in the unexpected and the unknown. We can be so busy fulfilling obligations of faith that we do not even notice God's hand at work all around us in so many amazing ways. We do not take the time to stop and be still, to listen as well as see, to immerse ourselves in honest and open conversation with God, to open our hearts to possibilities even though we might not see where the road is taking us. You could say it is living a second hand life of faith, through a habit without the essence of that habit present.

The missing ingredient – what is it? I call it everyday conversations with God that are honest and emotional, joyous and lamenting – much as the ancient psalmists did. I call it being in loving and therefore vulnerable relationship with God, interpreted by the presence of Jesus. May we each always live in honest and active relationship with our God.

Jesus, through Matthew's Gospel, calls it "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?" May we always know a Jesus who draws us into new understandings, who forever amazes and awes us.

In Isaiah we are assured "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting." May we always know we are forever the beloved of God, fruit of the blessed vine.

Calvin reminds us that 'God will prevail' against all that is mounted against the church. May we be always trusting in God, drawing strength and wisdom from the one who, in holy mystery and eternal love, desires to be closer to each one of us than our breath.

For no matter how you define that essential connection with our God, how you name your relationship with Christ the cornerstone; this we know to be true. When you carry the purpose of God in your very soul, every decision you make, every challenge you face, every trial and tribulation and celebration and joy is anchored in that certainty of God with us, forever. And for this we say thanks be to God. Amen.

Margaret Garland