

There are some pieces of scripture that are relatively easy to preach about, but today's Gospel readings does not fit in that category. With the caveat that parables can be interpreted in many ways, I offer you my interpretation of this text, knowing that like the proverbial Curate's Egg it may only be good in parts.

In the parable, a landowner has rented his vineyard for paying tenants to look after in his absence. I believe the landowner is supposed to represent God; and the vineyard to be ancient Israel. The tenant farmers represent the Jewish religious leaders, who believe they act as direct agents for God and therefore control what happens in the vineyard. By local custom, rental payments by the tenants were due after harvest and the landowner's servants would have been sent to collect what was owed to their master. Their visits come in two stages: firstly, the landowner's servants arrive and then are brutally killed. These I believe represent the prophets of The Bible who preached God's word to the people of Israel but were also killed for their troubles. For example, Jeremiah who was beaten to death, Isaiah who was torn in two and John the Baptist who was beheaded. In the second phase the landowner's son visits the vineyard. He is also brutally killed for doing his father's work. Jesus is I believe foretelling his own death here.

The story continues with a description of the owner of the vineyard judging and expelling the tenants. Here I believe Jesus is telling the priests and pharisees that their days in power are numbered. Their old ways will soon be replaced with a new way of relating to God; perhaps symbolised most powerfully on Good Friday when the temple curtain is rent in two. I interpret those described as taking over the vineyards as the Gentiles and converts to Christianity who will abandon their old ways and come to understand the grace and love of God through a faith in Jesus Christ. I believe that the key to understanding this passage lies just after the parable when Jesus, quoting from Psalm 118 says: "the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." Cornerstones and capstones are used symbolically in scripture to picture Christ as both the foundation of the church (like the foundational cornerstones that holds up a building) and the head of the church, like the upper stone that supports the different sides of an archway for example.

As Jesus speaks, he knows that he will soon be rejected and brought down by the religious and civic leaders of the day. But he also knows that he will on the third day rise from the ground heralding a new kingdom here on earth. The walls of the old ways will be broken, and new freedoms offered. The sharing in the fruit of the new kingdom will be on offer through God's grace and not human endeavour or rule making. Any stones that once protected the vineyard and old ways of doing religion are to crumble and be built up in a new pattern by the followers of Christ. Now, it would be very easy to read this passage and sit back and think smugly about how we are not anything like those leaders from first century Israel and what a jolly good job it is that we are 21st Century Christians. Of course, such a viewpoint is rather dangerous and would in my opinion smack of a multi-faith intolerance in general and anti-Semitism in particular.

Stones can be used to build something beautiful, like a church, but they can be used as a weapon to crush and wound. And even if we use them to build beautiful churches; their literal and metaphoric walls can be used to both welcome and to exclude people. Our church history suggests we have collective and individual reasons to lament, seek forgiveness and discern God's will for a better way to be. Terrible treatment of others in our history, the many wrong things done in the name of religion are part of a terrible litany of awful events. Our persecution of other faiths is perhaps top of our list of shame. Our past collaboration in the slave trade; our exclusion of women from church and civic leadership and the continued marginalisation of minority, ethnic and disabled groups from some aspects of church life are all reasons to stop and make a very honest appraisal of how we might better order our church and society. Add to that, the terrible wrongdoing of individuals and suddenly the wicked tenants in the vineyard seem much closer to home. On Tuesday 6th October, the independent enquiry into child sexual abuse will be published; marking I hope, a turning point in this dreadful part of our church's history. We have so much to both apologise for and learn from. Also, if we now look closer to home, at our own personal conduct; I wonder how we might see the vineyard tenants in ourselves. Can we all hand on heart say that we have never marginalised, disregarded, or failed to notice or care about aspects of God's creation or the people made in his image.

Our bible readings today are hard to read and painful to consider. I think they raise more questions than answers. But there is hope. At the heart of this bible reading is Jesus himself challenging us and urging us to change and grow more in his image; to be the good stewards and neighbours that God calls us to be. That God Loves us and longs for us to be collaborative with his will for the global vineyard and his people is clear. How well we measure up to the task is I suggest something we must all pray long and hard about. May we each discern and fulfil God's plan. This day and always. **Amen.**

Rev'd Lisa Cornell Trinity +17 Matthew 21: 33-46