



“God’s vineyard”

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Sunday 4th October 2020

Introduction

Hello. This week our worship reflections are based around another parable Jesus tells as recounted in St Matthew’s gospel. We are thinking about God’s vineyard which is a metaphor for the people of Israel and perhaps also for us. In the parable, if God is like the landowner who plants the vineyard then it is clear God puts a lot of work into tending people, including us. So we turn to a hymn that celebrates God’s goodness.

Hymn: Great is your faithfulness – *Worship Today 122*

1. Great is your faithfulness, O God my Father,
You have fulfilled all your promise to me;
You never fail and your love is unchanging
All you have been you forever will be:

*Great is your faithfulness! Great is your faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed your hand has provided.
Great is your faithfulness, Father, to me.*

2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in eloquent witness

in your great faithfulness, mercy and love :

3 Pardon for sin and a peace everlasting -
your living presence to cheer and to guide ;
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
these are the blessings your love will provide!

*Thomas O. Chisholm (1866–1960)
Modernization of the words by Jubilate Hymns*

Prayers

As the gardener prepares and clears the ground for the vine to grow and produce good fruit, help us, O God, to prepare ourselves to meet with you in worship so we too may grow and be fruitful. **Amen.**

God the gardener and carer of the vines, we praise you for the breath of life. We thank you for the love and care you give us. We are sorry our words and actions are not always like sweet wine. We ask you to help and encourage each one of us today to play our part in creating a fruitful vineyard. **Amen.**

Bible Reading Matthew 21: 33 – 46 The parable of the workers in the vineyard

³³“Listen to another parable,” Jesus said. “There was once a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip. ³⁴ When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent his slaves to the tenants to receive his share of the harvest. ³⁵ The tenants grabbed his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again the man sent other slaves, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all he sent his son to them. ‘Surely they will respect my son,’ he said. ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the owner’s son. Come on,

let's kill him, and we will get his property!' ³⁹ So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰ "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Jesus asked. ⁴¹ "He will certainly kill those evil men," they answered, "and rent the vineyard out to other tenants, who will give him his share of the harvest at the right time."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read what the Scriptures say? 'The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. This was done by the Lord; what a wonderful sight it is!'

⁴³ "And so I tell you," added Jesus, "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits." ⁴⁴ [a]

⁴⁵ The chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables and knew he was talking about them, ⁴⁶ so they tried to arrest him. But they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.

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Comment

Last week we heard the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28-32) which illustrates how the hated tax collectors and prostitutes were entering God's kingdom because they repented and believed. On the other hand, the religious leaders of the day, although they made the right noises, failed to repent and believe.

This week's parable follows this and is again directed at the religious leaders. You don't need to read between the lines to realise how the situation was growing increasingly hostile. Today we need to hear both the promise and the message of judgement in this parable if we are to avoid doing it a disservice.

The basic message of the parable to Jesus' original hearers is clear, including the "who's who", which the religious leaders themselves understood (v45). The landowner who planted the vineyard is God. The vineyard itself is God's people, Israel. The tenants are the religious leaders of the nation. The servants or slaves are the succession of prophets God sent to call the nation, its leaders in particular, to repent and turn back to Him. However, although God had provided a wonderful "vineyard", the leaders show flagrant disloyalty. God has provided the vineyard and all the necessary equipment to do the job and keep them safe. But what had the leaders done? All too often, they had used for their own ends what God had given. They had rejected and persecuted His prophets and denied God's rightful claims on them. But worse is to come...

Last of all, as the culmination to the line of prophets, God sends not a slave or a servant but His own son. Jesus, of course. And Jesus knows they are going to kill him.

At this point (v40), Jesus asks what the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants. His hearers, perhaps despite their better judgement, have got the basic message and blurt out, "He'll bring those wretches to a wretched end and will rent the vineyard to other tenants". Indeed, God will – He will not be mocked. With Jesus, His kingdom was taken from them and offered to those of any nation who would repent, turn to Him and produce fruit – the fruit that comes from a contrite heart given over to God's service. For even those who would dare to call themselves "God's people", deny themselves this status if they reject the stone [i.e. Jesus] God has made the cornerstone.

So, what are we to take from this parable? On the one hand, we have the promise that, whoever we may be and whatever we have done in the past, the kingdom of God is open to all who will repent and believe in Jesus. Nothing in the past, absolutely nothing, can keep us out of His kingdom if we turn back to God and place ourselves into His hands for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [Romans 10:13]. All of us who place our trust in Him, who come to Him with a contrite heart, will not be disappointed. As Peter said shortly after Pentecost, using the same image of the cornerstone from Psalm 18: "Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone'." Salvation is found in no one else,

for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." [Acts 4: 11-12].

On the other hand, this parable was controversial. It divided. It still has a cutting edge of which we mustn't lose sight. The implication the religious leaders had repeatedly rejected God's own prophets would have been hard enough for his original hearers. Jesus adds fuel to the fire by implying they will kill him and, in doing so, will be killing God's own son – someone unique and far superior to the prophets (the "servants or "slaves" in the parable). This was something these religious leaders were unwilling to accept. It is tragic that, although these religious leaders knew Jesus was speaking about them [v45] and understood the implications of the parable [v41] they would not repent. They would not believe in Jesus. Instead they reject Jesus, the cornerstone, they want to arrest him [v46] and ultimately it is some of their number who are instrumental in his execution.

So, again, what about us - individually and collectively as Christchurch? Where are we placing our trust? Is it in Jesus and in his saving work on the cross? Do we find ourselves, metaphorically speaking, coming to Jesus in repentance and faith, knowing our one true hope lies in Him? Or is there a danger we are trying, with our own efforts, to be good enough? The chief priests and pharisees were the upstanding religious people of the day, something in which they prided themselves. This pride led to their self-reliance and inability to admit their sinfulness.

Today, support for the disadvantaged and the lonely is a right response to God's grace in Christ. But a focus on this could also come from a heart that doesn't want to repent; doesn't want to admit its brokenness and sinfulness, and doesn't want to place itself solely and unreservedly into the hands of the living God. If we, as religious people, think we can save ourselves, and be good enough for God by our own efforts, we are sorely mistaken. If we act as though we have no need for the saving death of Jesus and don't want to acknowledge him as our Lord, then we are not fundamentally different from the chief priests and pharisees. The kingdom will be taken from us and given to those who will repent and believe. While this may not be a comfortable message, it is a sobering call to us to face up to the reality of who we are and who Jesus is. So, let us all turn again to Jesus in repentance and faith, pointing others to him and trusting only in him.

Questions for reflection

1. How as a church and as individuals might we better give God all the honour due?
2. What does a switch from "self-reliance" to "trust" in God mean to you?
3. Where around us are we already seeing the "fruit" of contrite hearts?

Hymn: When I survey the wondrous cross – *Singing the Faith* 287

The parable reminds us of the killing of Jesus. So we turn to this "Good Friday" hymn:

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| 1 When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride. | 4 His dying crimson, like a robe,
spreads o'er his body on the tree ;
then am I dead to all the globe,
and all the globe is dead to me. |
| 2 Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ my God ;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood. | 5 Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small ;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all. |
| 3 See from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down ;
did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown ? | |

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Prayers for others

Creator God, we thank you for all your gifts; for our beautiful, productive earth. Help us to steward it well and share all we have with others.
Make us faithful,
bearing good fruit.

Sustaining God, make us grateful for your gifts and generosity to others.
Make us faithful,
bearing good fruit.

Redeemer God, thank you for your love, for your son who came to show us what you are like, and how we should live.
Make us faithful,
bearing good fruit.

Eternal God, may we live as though we believe in tomorrow
so there will be a harvest for our children and joy in the faces of all your people.
Make us faithful,
bearing good fruit. Amen.

A way into prayer

With these worship sheets you should have found a paper vine leaf – you might like to take this and write on it something you would like God to tend and make fruitful now.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

Hymn: For the fruits of all creation, thanks be to God - *Singing the Faith 124*

It is harvest time, so we combine our passage and the season in this song:

- 1 For the fruits of all creation,
thanks be to God ;
for the gifts to every nation,
thanks be to God ;
for the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
silent growth while we are sleeping,
future needs in earth's safe-keeping,
thanks be to God.
- 2 In the just reward of labour,
God's will is done ;
in the help we give our neighbour,
God's will is done ;
in our world-wide task of caring

- for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvests we are sharing,
God's will is done.
- 3 For the harvests of the Spirit,
thanks be to God ;
for the good we all inherit,
thanks be to God ;
for the wonders that astound us,
for the truths that still confound us,
most of all, that love has found us,
thanks be to God.

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

Blessing

May God who plants vineyards call you to work for justice and righteousness.
May God who breaks down walls release you to work for justice and righteousness.
May God who offers new life sustain you as you work for justice and righteousness.
May you be blessed in the knowledge that you are a child of God. **Amen**