

Readings for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

8th October 2023

First Reading: Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'

Second Reading: Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: St Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants

and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 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, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

A Reflection for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Rev'd David Higgon

One of the good things that we do as a church here in the NW is to regularly study the bible together. We have advent and lent courses, and we have our monthly bible study group, all of which I find helpful in understanding scripture.

You can study the bible in many ways. You can study it as history, as literature, story poetry and song, you can study it as political theory and the influence it has had on political thought across the ages, and you can study how it is understood in different cultures and by different groups in society. You can study how the bible has been mis-used to justify slavery, to support apartheid, to suppress the rights of women and LGBTQ people, and to justify the abuse of God's creation.

But you don't need to be an academic or a biblical scholar to be able to read and interpret the bible - that is open to all of us. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit moving among us, that we can understand what scripture is saying to us in this place today. The joy of being in a small bible study group comes from listening and discussing other people's understanding of a text that can be quite different from your own. These differences arise from our life experiences which can give each of us a different perspective in how we read and understand that text.

At the moment our bible study group is working its way through the parables of Jesus. Traditionally the parables have been understood as being moral tales and illustrations of a spiritual truth that are quite unambiguous and straightforward, the sort of thing that is suitable for children's Sunday School lessons. But in reality they are often quite complex allegories that challenge us to think about what Jesus was saying to us. I believe that Jesus told these stories in a way that was more than simply illustrating a spiritual truth, but rather they are intended to stimulate, challenge and provoke our understanding of that spiritual truth.

In today's parable there is an emphasis on judgment, that can be read as an allegory: the vine yard represents Jerusalem and the temple, the two sets of servants represent the prophets, the son represents Jesus and the land

owner is God. God, as landowner, is denied what is rightly is by wicked tenants and the moral is persuasive and clear that we are to give to God what is rightly is.

In my university course I am studying the resistance in the Highlands to the clearances before the 1870's, which give me cause to consider whether you can read this parable not from the landowner's point of view but from the perspective of the poor and dispossessed. Read in this way, the landowner is an absentee landlord, perhaps a tyrant for whom the land is a commodity, and the produce of the land is taken as profit and taken away from the community. In this reading, the denial of God's ownership of the vineyard rests not on the tenants but with the landlord. The actions of the tenants are not those of a wicked usurper but the protest of those for whom land is a gift of God which blesses the community.

Whichever way you choose to read the parable, there is a violation of God's lordship and of God's purpose by those who are the custodians and stewards of a gift bestowed by God, and that this violation turns on wealth and our desire to hold on to it tightly. God's choice for Israel forms the background to the parable. It ends ultimately in the removal of the kingdom from Israel and while the allegory of the vineyard as Jerusalem would have been understood by those hearing the story, these people would also have known the harsh reality of poverty. Land is God's gift and provision to his people. It is the source of wealth, a place of family and community, it is a place that sustains life. It is not there to be parcelled up, sold and resold for profit and for creating a widening gap between rich and poor.

Today's parable is also a tale of violence and murder, and arguably contributed to Jesus' own death.

So these stories can be really uncomfortable to hear, uncomfortable in the questions they ask of us. It has been said that the purpose of the gospel is to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable.

This was certainly an uncomfortable message for the chief priests and elders to hear. They are identified as the ones who resort to violence and murder in opposition to God. However, the parable also challenges all who see themselves as God's people, in every place and age. Are we good tenants of that which has been entrusted to us whether as individuals, as a society, as a Church, and as custodians of our environment? Do we act as if we will never have to give account of our stewardship?

Jesus told stories that demonstrated the deep inner motivation of the human heart. Today's challenging Gospel demonstrates that we can make no assumptions about our standing with God, nor can we assume that human beings will always choose the best way.

Wherever God's people are, there is the expectation of justice and of lives lived according to the values of the kingdom. However, God's people are not immune from arguments, misplaced priorities and a failure to respond to the needs of others.

Jesus challenges us as to how we should live, what our priorities are and what our motivations might be. Given that we are all prone to putting self above others, and in spite of having good intentions, we often choose to do the wrong thing. Jesus' teachings continually challenge us about our lives and our choices and our ongoing need for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit

We are all pilgrims on a journey of faith, and there will always be uncertainty as whether we are taking the right path, and whether we are doing what is right and just by God, in how we treat our fellow human beings and God's gift of

creation. We can never always be sure we are doing what is right or to be certain what we are doing is enough. However, what we can be, is thankful to God for all that is, and is to be; to cherish his gift to us and to cherish each other by being a people of faith, of hope and of love for each other, and for others and for the whole of God's creation.