

Sunday Sermon - 04.10.20

Delivered by Rev'd Stephen Monsiegnur

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21.33-46 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

33 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. 35 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said. 38 'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.' 42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"? 43 'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.' 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Have you ever made a promise and failed to keep it?

We have all made promises in our lives, promises that when we borrow something, we will return it as it was lent, promises that we will meet certain targets for repayments and so on. Those of us who have been confirmed recited for ourselves our baptismal promises originally made on our behalf by others. Importantly, when we make or receive promises we in good faith expect that they will be kept but sometimes for all kinds of reasons they are not.

Take a bank loan for instance, after formalising the promise by signing a contract, both myself as borrower and the bank as the lender expect the contract to be fulfilled. However, despite my best intentions and expectations of integrity, we have also known that feeling of tightness or anxiety as we realise that there is no absolute guarantee that we will with certainty meet our obligation. No matter how honest our intent the metaphorical 'left field' could throw its curve ball that we fail to catch and so we experience unexpected struggles.

This was the situation the landowner experienced in this gospel passage. He leases his land and vineyard to the tenants for them to farm and in payment share with him a percentage of the profit. In contemporary terms we refer to this as share farming. Landowner does not farm the land while farmer does not own the land. Seems an equitable sharing of resources and skill that will benefit all. So, the landowner reasonably expects the share farmers to fulfill their part of the contract and in doing so he sees profit in his investment. How wrong the landowner was carefully planning for the vineyard to be productive, but the tenants even with a deal in place, planned how they might take what did not belong to them. Both parties were sadly and with

tragic results misguided in their planning. It is obvious that no matter how well intentioned we may be, some decisions are simply not what is best for us.

It is essential that we understand what Jesus is saying and critically to whom he is speaking.

This is not a warm and fuzzy scripture; it is hard and confronting with violence and deceit.

As I mentioned last week, our current series of Sunday gospel readings all begin with the “Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people.” In telling this parable of a landowner who takes the time to plan and care while building the vineyard to be successful, and of the tenants whose intentions and increasingly aggressive actions are about usurping ownership over what is not theirs, Jesus is issuing judgment against the chief priests and the elders of the people; and in doing so Jesus does not hold back, he leaves no room for uncertainty, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you . . . and given to the people that will produce its fruit.” That’s right, access to Gods glory can be lost if one turns their back on the promise to love God.

How often have we been satisfied that we have done enough to be secure? After all we are baptised, we pray, we go to church, we are nice to people, even people who make poor decisions and life choices compared with those that have led to our success.

It is not to hard to recognise ourselves standing there in front of Jesus, in the shoes of the chief priests and elders of the people. If we are to truly know God, we are required to live attentive to the responsibility such a promise of relationship requires. God is not distant, as if not in our reach, rather God is always with us through the Holy Spirit, in the lives of all others around us, family friends and strangers. God is throughout the created universe always wanting to know us more.

We need to live lives where our benchmark is honesty, integrity and the will to trust in God’s love which knows no limit, a love that supports us to get up each time we stumble.

I suspect that most of us have spent time and resources trying to improve our lot in life. Trying to get whatever it is that we use to define as success. Wanting to get ahead is natural and where growth in self awareness and being a better person is the aim, it is commendable. However, getting ahead for most is about looking good to others, it is about ego and self-aggrandisement and not about growth.

In our gospel passage we see the effort to which the vineyard owner will go to see a return of the investment. The vineyard is a metaphor for Gods kingdom, God self is the vineyard owner and humanity the tenants. Like the vineyard owner, God puts all that God is, all the divine heart into coaxing the tenants to honour their part of the agreement to see the vineyard produce fruit.

But in our case what is the fruit that we are called to produce?

The fruit is life, not ordinary life but life offered by God, and to achieve this life we are required to die to the self. We are to stop putting ourselves first and instead put God’s kingdom first. We are called to reflect on our lives as the farmer reflects on the growth of the crop and remove whatever hinders the crops growth to good fruit. For many of us this is challenging, it is easier to be like the chief priests and the elders of the people and find fault in others. God understands our penchant for doing this, but it is necessary we do as through weeding

out un-productive behaviours etc, we allow room for life-giving behaviours to grow. We must listen not only to ourselves but to others and then be honest with ourselves.

The tenants of the vineyard ultimately killed the vineyard owner's son when he came to collect what was rightfully his fathers. Let us pray, for mercy for those times when we have acted as the tenants, turning away from God, ignoring or sugar coating the Word of God. Let us ask for the grace of wisdom to recognise when our behaviour separates us from God, and the strength to amend it. Amen.