



Reflection by Hillarie Griggs

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
Matt 21:33-46
8th October 2023

This week's gospel tells another parable set in a vineyard. In many English translations it is called "the parable of the wicked tenants" but it might be worth mentioning that that word wicked is not found in the text. I must confess I love the parables. Maybe they appeal to my love of storytelling and, like all the best stories, can be read on many different levels. A definition of a parables is that it is "a fictional yet realistic story that illustrates a spiritual truth". Jesus certainly used parables as a very effective means of teaching and in Mark 4:33-34 it is written "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables"

This parable is one of a handful that can be found in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. We must conclude that this particular parable was important to the writers of these gospels and contains a truth that they wanted to pass on to their readers.

In the story the landlord had invested a lot in the vineyard. Clearing land was hard back-breaking work especially in heat without the aid of modern machinery. When everything was planted he gave it to the tenants expecting the vineyard to produce fruit and then to be given payment. However, when it came time to pay the tenants not only refused but they tried to claim the vineyard as their own. They reacted with increasing violence as they tried to hold on to what they had and in the end this resulted in the murder of the landlord's son.

This is the second parable in response to the Chief Priests and Pharisees questioning Jesus about his authority to do the things he has done in the temple and it contains more details about the vineyard. Some of the original listeners, including the Chief Priests and Pharisees, would have immediately recognised the description of the vineyard from Isaiah 5:1-7. That is why they knew that the parable was about them. They would have been listening closely to what direction Jesus was taking the story. Jesus' emphasis is not on what the vineyard has done wrong, as in Isaiah, but about the tenants.

If we only look at this parable as a warning to the Chief Priests and Pharisees it would be very easy for us to dismiss it as having little, if any, relevance to our lives. But as Paul said in 2 Timothy 3: 16-17 "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

What can this parable say to us 2,000 years later? The first thing to note is that the landlord gave his tenants a vineyard where everything was provided. God has given us a beautiful place to live, he provides abundantly for our needs and he asked for nothing in return except a little respect for his creation. But like the tenants we forget that we are only stewards and can delude ourselves into thinking that we are in charge and that all of the world's resources only belong to us.

When we hear the concluding verses in today's reading how often do we think that verse 43, which contains a warning to 'produce the fruit of the kingdom', applies to us. Yes, we too are expected to produce the fruit of the Kingdom. Matthew makes it clear that the new tenants have the same responsibility as the old. New tenants who think that they are working for themselves could face the same fate as the old ones.

In the natural world, fruit is the result of a healthy plant producing what it was designed to produce. In the Bible, the word fruit is often used to describe a person's outward actions that result from the condition of the heart. Good fruit is produced by the Holy Spirit and will be seen in a change in our attitudes and actions as we are transformed to be more Christ-like. We will notice and want to act on things that are unjust and want to meet need with generosity.

We might ask ourselves if the landlord sends a messenger to receive fruits from us, what would we have to offer and would we be as resentful as the tenants and attack the messenger?

