

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist
Sunday 4 October 2020
10am

Trinity 17
Proper 22

Isaiah 5.1-7
St Matthew 21.33-46

Just down the hill below the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Hospital in Nazareth, archaeologists discovered the site of a first century vineyard. It's entirely possible that Jesus played there as a child. You can even see the remains of the watchtower the farmer built, giving a vantage point from which to look out for predators and worse. We also know from other historical sources that much of the land in Galilee was owned by Herod and his cronies, and that they were bitterly resented by their tenants for extorting exorbitant rents.

On first reading, we might be forgiven for wondering why Jesus chose to tell this story in the middle of what we now call Holy Week. None of the characters, not the landowner, not the tenants, come out of it well. Not that Jesus was the first to use such an image. As we heard in our first reading, Isaiah had done the same before him.

For the last twenty years or so I've been joining a group of clergy and Readers on retreat in the run-up to Advent. For obvious reasons I won't

be going this year. On the other hand, six months of living alone in the conditions of partial lockdown has been a bit like a retreat. It's given me (and probably you as well) plenty of time to think, to read and reflect, to do the sort of introspective spiritual self-examination that we all need to do from time to time. I've been asking myself, What answer will I be giving to the landowner's servants when they come with the Father's demands for a share of the harvest of my life? It's made me think about my response to questions like those thrown up by the pandemic; or the climate crisis, black lives matter, the injustices of inequality... I could go on, and you've probably got your own additions to such a list.

What *is* our response going to be? Because I'll tell you what my first response has been. It's resentment. It's defensiveness. Am I not already doing my bit for the climate by bicycling to church? Haven't I already faced up to the history of my racism in sermons I've preached? Don't I already give enough to charity? What more do you want of me, O God? If you go on at me,

when I'm trying my best, don't be surprised if I start to get angry, and worse?

We are seeing similar resentments all around us. We see it in the growing anger at the re-instated Coronavirus restrictions. We see it over in the United States, in increasing violence and the fight back by white supremacists. And I bet, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer eventually does put up taxes to pay for the huge debt the government has incurred, there'll be a huge push-back from the very people who have money and can afford to pay more in tax.

When trying to make sense of Christ's parables it's important to remember they aren't the whole gospel. They are just one small part of the whole. Because if this morning's vineyard parable was all that was to be said, the gospel far from being good news would be pretty bleak. The landowner (especially if he was a first century Galilean landlord) isn't a good analogy for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This land-lord is unforgiving and without mercy.

Nevertheless, Jesus was serious about his warnings. And we need to be serious when reading the signs of the times. We know that if we don't observe the rules designed to contain the virus, people will get ill and some will die. What's the point of having the freedom to go to the pub if we're too ill (or worse) to go out? If we don't change our fossil fuel polluting way of life God (or nature) will end humankind's tenancy of this planet and hand it over to the viruses and bacteria. Actions do have consequences – for us, for our neighbours, for future generations.

Our problem with this parable, were it to be all that is to be said about God and his relationship with us, would be that it portrays a God who is driving his subjects into a corner. As we all know, if a bully or a criminal is driven into a corner, in the short term at least the likelihood is they are going to be more violent, more dangerous. That is when the outcome is, as the parable predicts, a miserable death for the tenants, and the re-letting of the lease to others.

But that's not what God does in our real world story, Christ's story, what happened next. The

parable was followed a day or two later by the miracle of the stone rejected by the builders becoming the head cornerstone, by the events of Good Friday transformed by the Easter resurrection.

Among the crowds who heard Christ's parable that first Holy Week were the disciples and others whose immediate response wasn't all that noble either. Think of Peter's denial, or even of Joseph of Arimathæa (who may or may not have been in the crowd) who kept quiet during Jesus' trial but at least gave him a decent burial. Was it enough? Probably not. But in the mercy of God, that's not the point.

When we really look into our hearts we realise that there is no adequate rent or share of the harvest we could pay God for the tenancy of our lives. Still less can we offer any recompense for our sins which'll do. We are where we are. The damage done by our sins, and the sins of our forebears, is done.

But God has known this all along. It's precisely why he sends not just the prophets but his Son.

And the first person to benefit from Christ's mercy on the Cross was someone who'd probably not heard his parable (because he'd have been in prison). He was someone who everyone agreed had put himself out of any sort of covenant relationship with God. He was one of the thieves being crucified with Christ.

As he hung in agony he turned to the Father's emissary to humankind and pleaded "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And the Lord's reply? "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

