

## Trinity 18

Once again in our gospel today, we hear Jesus speaking in parable. He tells a story, not for the sake of telling a nice story, or to make wise sayings or give direction and advice. It isn't a gentle parable. Rather it's a story that aims to shock people into thinking. Especially the target audience of chief priests and pharisees.

As he often does, Jesus tells a parable that although not immediately clear to his listeners, gives them enough to wonder what he's trying to say.

Our parable today is the parable of the tenants in the vineyard, which is not unlike the parable of the king who holds a wedding banquet for his son.. It contains a certain element of violence and discomfort.

We hear of a landowner who plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, digs a wine press in it and builds a watchtower. He leases it to tenants and then goes to another country. When the harvest time comes he sends his slaves to the tenants to collect the produce, but the tenants mistreat the slaves, even killing one of them. He then sends other slaves and they are treated in the same way. Finally he sends his son thinking that they will respect his son. But the tenants say, 'this is the heir, come let us kill him and get his inheritance, so they seize him, throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. Jesus then asks those who are listening what the owner of the vineyard will do when he comes. They answer, he will put the tenants to death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.

A bit extreme we might think. It's one thing to refuse to give over the produce at harvest time, but it's another thing to react in such a violent way, first to the slaves and then the son. And then we have the perhaps understandable but violent reaction of the vineyard owner.

So not exactly a bedtime story or a nice harvest story of thanksgiving. But Jesus as he often does, uses extremities to make a point. What is Jesus saying to his listeners, the chief priests and Pharisees? Men who represented the religious hierarchy of Israel. What Jesus is trying to say to them is that they are part of the story of the landowner and the vineyard. The bad news for them is that they are the baddies. They are the tenants who mistreat the slaves and kill the son.

Whom we might ask are the servants and the son supposed to be?

Jesus is trying to say that his target audience, God's people Israel, have rejected the message of the prophets sent to them. Israel as described in Isaiah is the vineyard, but instead of producing fruit for the growth of God's Kingdom they have only sought to keep it for themselves. As people of the covenant, they were entrusted with so much but have given back so little. Indeed they have even rejected the Son who is Jesus and will be responsible for his death.

So where does this leave the people of Israel now? Well they have rejected the teachings of the prophets and they have rejected their very God incarnate in his Son Jesus. A sweeping generalisation we might say, but this is a hard hitting parable that's out to make a point! The stone is identified with Jesus and the builders are the religious leaders he's addressing.

Jesus says to the chief priests and Pharisees, '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.'

Who we might ask are these new people God is talking about. Who now will be entrusted to produce the fruits of the vineyard for the good of God's kingdom? Well it's anyone who wants to listen and receive Jesus into their lives. Those who are not part of the old covenant are invited into a new covenant. The new Israel.

And that is good news for all of us.

God invites us into his vineyard and that's an offer we can gratefully accept. But we must learn the lesson of the parable and make sure we don't produce fruit just for ourselves, which ultimately is superficial and not real fruit at all. Instead we must relish the chance we have to labour in the vineyard and produce the fruits of God's Kingdom, so that when the son comes, we will be delighted to see him and he will be pleased at what we have to offer.

And when we rest from our labours, the feast to celebrate the harvest will be so plentiful and the wine will taste so good!

Amen