

Our Stewardship of the Vineyard Matthew 21:33-46

For a number of weeks now in our gospel readings, we have heard Jesus use vineyard imagery as metaphors of our relationship with God and one another centred around the vineyard. Jesus used this image a lot, along with other farming and growing images, as did old testament prophets and the psalmist. Like us living in the Riverina, rural imagery was something Jesus listeners could relate to.

So today we hear a parable about a vineyard, and a landowner who leased his vineyard to the vineyard workers, or tenant farmers but they don't turn out to be your average leasee, in fact they're quite brutal. Jesus says:

'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.'

The truth is these very same leaseholders doing all this harm to the slaves and owners son represent God's people! God has given them stewardship over the vineyard as a gift, an opportunity, to work with him to bear fruit in his vineyard and he would like to see some evidence of the fruits of the labours. Yet the farmers do not wish to share, or submit to the authority of the landowner, that is God, and although messages (the slaves) are sent, the messengers are ignored, beaten or killed, much like God's messengers the prophets were dealt with over many centuries as the relationship of the Jewish people and God unfolded. So, the landlord sends his son 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.'

Of course, it's easy to see the hidden metaphor here, God's Son, Jesus himself, comes to bring God's message to his wayward people, but he too is rejected by those who think that by being in possession of the vineyard – the gift of God, they hold the power in the relationship. So, he reminds 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"?'

At the end of the parable, no one is in any doubt who it is Jesus is referring to, and the religious leaders, about whom the whole parable is written, even see themselves targeted. But they were the Jewish religious leaders, what do they have to do with us?

Our second reading from Philippians gives us some insight. By birth and by choice, Paul outlines his previous work history describing himself as the example of the errant Jewish leader who had been a part of God's vineyard, the people of Israel:

“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.”

Like the tenant farmer in our gospel, Paul identifies himself as one who with zeal persecuted the church in order to maintain the status quo of the vineyard despite God's messengers. But he has realised through his conversion in Christ, through his prayers and his living relationship with God that in Jesus, none of that is worth a thing:

“... 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.”

Paul has come to understand that his relationship with God is made possible by grace alone, and he was invited into that relationship having responded to a call to his heart. Nothing he did or refrained from doing helped him to get there, his change of life is in response to God's love and not in order to gain favour or to obtain love. But most of all Paul realises that he doesn't have it all worked out yet either saying:

‘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.’

Like Paul's pre-Christian life, the Pharisee's in our gospel reading thought they had their religious life sorted. Like the brutal tenants, they received all they needed from the owner, but they refused to accept his graciousness and turned their backs on him, his servants, and even his son. By their actions and inactions, Jesus says they have cast themselves out of the vineyard:

‘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.’

Today’s gospel story then reminds us of the great theme of stewardship that is so central to the life of the church and to the health-giving focus of individual Christians. We need to remember that God’s way of grace and love is calling each one of us to respond to our good fortune of living in his vineyard by reflecting that love in our actions toward others. That as we care for, as we exercise stewardship throughout the vineyard of God’s creation, especially our fellow human beings, we do so as a reflection of God’s love. That love is our amazing cornerstone, poured out to us in such measure that it overflows from us, and through us can overflow onto all creation. An overflow that impels us to love others and share with them the Good News of God in Christ – a truth they might miss if we ignore our mission and neglect that which so graciously enriches us.

The Lord be with you.