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Sermon

A Privilege and a Responsibility

Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46; Isaiah 5:1-7

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How many of you have travelled on the underground in London? If you take the tube in from Heathrow to Central London you dive underground miles from the city centre and rattle through tunnels on your journey. In due course, you get out at a station and take the escalator up to ground level. And you pop out into daylight like a rabbit from a burrow to find that the world is bustling around you. You have arrived at the centre without seeing anything of the city on the way. People are travelling on buses, people in taxis, in their cars, on foot - all intent on their business while you were travelling underneath them unaware of their existence.

It feels to me like that with our readings: We have focussed on Romans for some weeks to the exclusion of other lectionary lines. Now we have arrived at the end of that journey, we pop up and plunge into the crowd of Piccadilly or Kings Cross as the currents of people swirl around us intent on their destinations.

Readings in Matthew's gospel have continued while we have concentrated on Romans. Now we emerge back into the main stream and need to get our bearings.

The gospel passage is set in Holy Week after the Triumphal entry. On the Sunday of that week, Jesus rode into Jerusalem and cleared the Temple of traders (21:1-17). With his disciples, he retired to the Mount of Olives to sleep that night. The next day, he returned to Jerusalem and started to teach in the temple courts.

(V23) There he was challenged by the religious leaders about his authority to teach and do miracles. Remember at this point, he has been teaching and ministering for three years. It is also a few days before his looming execution. They are still resisting and challenging his ministry. In fact, the momentum against him is building among the leaders, especially since he raised Lazarus from the dead as is recounted in John chapter 11.

We heard this exchange read last week. Jesus answered their question with a question which is a very Jewish way of arguing but also very wise. We need to learn that skill in our discussions about spiritual matters. He asked them about the baptism of John the Baptist. "Was it from heaven or from men?" (v25) In other words, was John calling people to repentance because God told him to, or was that a human initiative? This is not just a question to put them on the back foot. It is crucial because John's preaching was to prepare the way for Jesus. Unless they understand his preaching, they will not understand Jesus' action of clearing the temple

which was in part a fulfilment of the prophecy that the “The Lord would come suddenly to his temple”¹. Unless they accept John’s message, “Repent!” they will not be able to accept Jesus’ message of “Believe!”

As we heard last week, the leaders consult with each other and decide to avoid the answer by saying they don’t know. But even that answer is an answer – if they are not competent or willing to assess John, it shows their incompetence to judge Jesus.

From this position, Jesus went on with three parables to reveal God’s judgement of the leaders of Israel for rejecting God’s messenger and son.

The first of the parables – the two sons (vv28-32) made the point that obedience should be in action as well as words. When Jesus asked them which son did as the father wanted they answered correctly that the one who did what he was asked to do. Jesus agreed and told them that although they say they will obey God, but they would not obey the call when it came through John to repentance.

The second and third parables are the parable of the Tenants and the Wedding Banquet. These charge the leaders with lack of loyalty and having no standing in the Kingdom of God respectively.

Having now popped up from the tube and established our bearings let us concentrate on the second parable: the Parable of the Tenants.

The Parable of the Tenants

It is obvious that Jesus is basing it on the Parable from Isaiah 5 we heard in the Old Testament reading. The setting is the same, the people are the same. In both cases there is a vineyard established by a landowner. He does all the responsible preparation for growing vines and protecting them against animals and thieves. He has cleared the ground, dug it and planted the vines, built a wall and planted a protective hedge, built a watchtower and prepared a winepress for the expected harvest.

In both cases, the vine is the people of Israel and God is the landowner. He is disappointed and takes action to deal with the situation. However, there are differences too.

In Isaiah, God is tending the grapes but instead of good grapes the harvest produces bad grapes. The situation is that although Israel is in covenant relationship with God, she is not bringing forth good fruit. In the rest of the chapter we are told what sort of fruit they are showing:

- **Greed:** amassing property and driving out the poor.
- **Self-indulgence:** drinking and feasting to excess.
- **Cynicism:** Deliberately sinning while claiming to do no wrong.
- **Moral twistedness:** Reversing moral precepts calling good evil and evil good.
- **Social Injustice:** Taking bribes and denying justice to the innocent.

What was to be the judgement? For this bad fruit, God would destroy the vineyard. He would tear down its protections – the hedge, the wall, the watchtower; tear out the plants and allow wild beasts to trample and destroy it all. In other words, the exile! Their protection would be torn away and wild beasts (enemy nations) would trample their land. This was the judgement on the vineyard of Israel looming in Isaiah’s time.

New Testament

Now Jesus takes that parable and retells it with a twist. There is nothing wrong with the grapes, it is that the landowner does not get his grapes. He has let the vineyard out to tenants and they refuse to pay him with his share of the crop. Various messengers are sent asking for the rent in grapes but they reject the messengers (the prophets) and even kill them. Finally, the landowner decides to send his son; he too is thrown out and killed.

¹ Malachi 3:1-2

Jesus stops to ask what the landowner would do. The leaders can't help but reply that he will severely destroy those bad men and let the vineyard to (literally) whomever will pay him the fruit at the appointed time.

Before it was the grapes which were bad, now it is the tenants. It is not that the vineyard should be destroyed it needs to be cared for by different people: whoever will give its fruit to the owner.

Jesus explains that the vineyard is the Kingdom of God and the responsibility for it on earth will be taken away from them and be given to a people who will produce its fruit.

This is another challenge to the chief priests and elders of the people, another warning, another opportunity to repent. He is telling them who he is and what they have done. He is clearly identified as the son of the landowner that is God. Here is another of the many passing claims of divinity in the gospels. They had asked by what authority he acted – here is the answer: he is the son of the landowner sent to claim the fruit. He is the son of God. And they are not being loyal to God. He even prophesies what they will do to him – throw him out and kill him – is that not a warning – a call to change direction - to any with ears to hear?

That brings us to the outcome: He says, "The Kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (v43). What does he mean?

For a start he is talking to the leaders not the people as a whole – that is the context of the exchange. This is not replacement theology that the church is the new Israel. Rather we see the kingdom given to a new people born again into the kingdom. Initially, all of these followers of Jesus were Jews – born again, Messianic Jews – a new people who started to bring forth the fruit of the kingdom.

Before the mission was centripetal drawing people to come and see. The Jews stayed in their land and interested gentiles came to them.

But this new people of the Kingdom would be centrifugal spreading out from the centre. Now Jesus' disciples will go out to the nations with the gospel to make disciples.²

Recently, we thought about Romans 11, where Paul spoke of the position of the Jewish people in God's economy. He saw the people of God like an olive tree. The roots are the patriarchs, the stem the Jewish people. But now some of that olive tree has not born fruit and some branches have been broken off because of their unbelief. Meanwhile some non-Jews have been grafted in by faith. Being grafted in to the root stock of the people of God means we are supported by the roots of the ancient people of God and we share the nourishing sap rising from the roots.³

Dr Michael Wilkins Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Biola University wrote:

The role of carrying out God's purposes through the kingdom of God has been taken away from the nation of Israel in the present age, and Jesus' disciples currently enjoy both the blessings of the kingdom of God and the responsibility of the role of carrying the message of the gospel of the Kingdom. But Israel is still kept in view as receiving in the future the fulfilment of the promises of the kingdom.^{4 5}

That means we have a great commission and a great responsibility. Just as God judged the Jewish leaders for their failure to be good stewards of the kingdom, might he not remove stewardship from parts of the church which fail to be good stewards of the gospel? There is a warning for us.

² Mt 28:18-20

³ Romans 11:17-18

⁴ Wilkins, M., 2004, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p706.

⁵ Jewish people yet to receive the promises of the kingdom:

Mt 23:37-39: Jesus says to Jerusalem, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Rom 11:25-32: "...And so all Israel will be saved ... v29 For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

Rev 7:1-8: The sealing of 12,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Returning again to the illustration of our being grafted into the olive tree of God's people. Paul wrote in verse 21-22:

For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

Yesterday I met a lady who mentioned she had taken a little girl to the cathedral. The child asked, "Do people still go to church?" Oh, that hit me! How far we have fallen when our children wonder if anyone goes to church.

I said last week that we have a great message which we must take to the nations. That is the conclusion of this passage too. How important is it? Our reading from Philippians gives us a clue. There is Paul with the best background; the best training; the most intense practice, who could say he was faultless in legalistic righteousness. Yet he counts it all as rubbish to be discarded for the privilege of following Christ and the righteousness that comes from God by faith in Christ.

My sisters and brothers, we have a huge privilege – let us be good stewards of the Kingdom. Let us spread the word, tell our children, our neighbours, our friends. We are entrusted with good news and the opportunity to be co-workers with Christ. Pray for healing. Pray about difficult situations. Our job is to ask, God's job is to answer.