



## Sermon

7<sup>th</sup> October 2023

### ***Privilege and a Responsibility***

**Matthew 21:33-46**

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The gospel reading carries on directly from last week. You will remember that the setting is after the Triumphal entry a few before the crucifixion. On the Sunday of that week, Jesus had cleared the Temple of traders.

He was challenged by the religious leaders about basis of his authority. Jesus answered their question with a question which is a very Jewish way of arguing and 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 was not just a question to put them on the back foot. It was crucial because John’s preaching was to prepare the way for Jesus.

In John chapter 1, John the Baptist called Jesus, “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”<sup>1</sup> and explicitly, “The Son of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Unless they understood John’s preaching, they would not understand Jesus’ action of clearing the temple. His action was, in part, a fulfilment of the prophecy that the “The Lord would come suddenly to his temple”<sup>3</sup>. Unless they accepted John’s message, “Repent!” they would not be able to accept Jesus’ message of “Believe!”

As we heard last week, the leaders consulted with each other and decide to avoid the answer by saying they don’t know. But even that answer is an answer – if they were not competent or willing to assess John, it showed 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 actions speak louder than 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.

Yesterday we held a working bee to do some weeding and tidying up of the grounds. There was quite a small list of names of those who said they would come, but about three times as many actually showed up! They may not have said they would come, but they did and it was very good. Thank you to all who helped and a big thank you to Alison, Uta and Phread for organising it all.

The second parable is the parable of the Tenants. This charges the leaders with lack of loyalty.

#### ***The Parable of the Tenants***

It is obvious that Jesus is basing it on an Old Testament Parable from Isaiah 5. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:29, 36

<sup>2</sup> v34

<sup>3</sup> Malachi 3:1-2

In both cases, the vine represents 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, drinking and feasting to excess, deliberately sinning while claiming to do no wrong, good evil and evil good, 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 which happened in 597BC. Their protection would be torn down 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.

Jesus stops to ask what the landowner should do. The leaders can't help but reply that he will deal severely with those men and let the vineyard to 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 Jews – a new people who started to bring forth the fruit of the kingdom.

Before the mission drew 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.<sup>4</sup>

In Romans 11, writing maybe 30 years later, Paul spoke of the position of the Jewish people in God's economy. He likened the people of God to 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

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<sup>4</sup> Mt 28:18-20

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6 7</sup>

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.

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.

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.

In a week's time, we are sending a group of four parish leaders to a conference in Wellington called Leading Your Church into Growth. Alison, Andrew B-B, Helen and I will go to learn from two trainers visiting from England. We are very aware of the need to up our game. Not just us, but all the church in NZ and the Western world. We are investing in this seminar to see what good practices we can learn to help this parish grow.

The other news in this department is that for the last year, I have been working with Peter and Lorraine to develop a project to help a group of interested Auckland parishes to meet the challenges we all face. We identified an agency called City to City which runs a Parish Revitalisation coaching project. We have spoken to five reference parishes and hear good reports of the work in those places. I am pleased to report that at our Vestry meeting last week, we unanimously agreed to embark on this project. So far, two other parishes are going ahead and another five are actively considering it. I expect to see action early in the new year.

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, we need to rise to the challenge we have inherited to pass it on to a needy world.

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 11:17-18

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, M., 2004, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p706.

<sup>7</sup> 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.