

Sunday Between 2nd and 8th October [27]

Matthew 21:33-46

We are laden today, as we have been for a number of weeks, with vineyard imagery, 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 so vineyards were certainly nothing new in scripture and they worked as an image because they were commonplace in the region of Israel, it was something people could relate to, otherwise it wouldn't have been used!

The image of the vineyard we have in St. Matthew's gospel today, has Jesus speaking in a parable about a vineyard, the vineyard workers, the tenant farmers, they are God's people. God has given them 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. The farmers do not wish to share, or submit to the authority of the land owner, that is God, and although messages 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. Ah, thinks God, I will send my son, they will respect him, not much of a hidden metaphor there, 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. 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, they have no authority with us, right?

Well of course, all of scripture was written at a particular time and in a particular context but if it were all about the history of our faith then the bible would be no more than a reference manual – letting us know how it used to be – rather than the living word of God that is truly is. In this instance we have to consider that reading from St Paul to the church in Philippi to see how all of this relates to us.

Paul speaks to Christians, not Jews necessarily although some may be, but predominantly gentile Christians and he puts the other readings we have considered this morning into context without mentioning a single one, because he himself is the example of the errant Jewish leader who had been a part of God's vineyard, the people of Israel by birth and by choice as he was not only born Jewish but choose to study the law and become a Pharisee, thus making his relationship with God his top priority, Paul identifies himself as the tenant farmer 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, his prayers and his living relationship with God through Jesus that none of that is worth a thing. He has come to understand that his relationship with God is made possible by grace alone, 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.

There are no easy solutions, no rules anyone can give you to guarantee right relationship with God, all anyone can do is offer you that same invitation to accept God in to your life and after that its between you guys. We come together to be church in order to walk this road of faith together, to support one another when it gets difficult and to celebrate together when its brilliant. But it's not all sorted yet. That was where those Pharisees had strayed, they had rules and laws but God became second to those laws as they became inflexible and increasingly onerous. God gave Moses 10 commandments; the religious leaders wrote the

book of Leviticus by extrapolating those 10 and ended up removing the love between human and divine relationships which was all that the 10 commandments sought to facilitate.

But if we think that somehow this message is only for the nation of Israel, or only for those early church members, or only for unbelievers we are in a very dangerous place. This warning needs to be heeded by each one of us. Every time we put process before people, every time we use the rules to avoid personal encounter, every time we put the needs of us and our group before the mission of God, we are like the tenant farmers. We have been given God's gift of working for him by grace in his vineyard, but God is the landowner, the fruits of our labours belong to God, they should be pleasing to God. We must guard against becoming like the Pharisees, we are a part of the institution of the church and we are responsible to it and its traditions, but when we protect the church we have to be sure we are not protecting it from God! God's mission is alive and well, tending the vineyard, but today that vineyard is not one nation, but worldwide, God is not interested in one group of people to the exclusion of others, God is opening wide his arms of mercy to all, whatever their background or shortcomings. How can we be so sure he would welcome just anyone, well God took us in, just as we were, with all our flaws, and as the tenant farmers today, we too must tend the vineyard, nurture the fruits of others' labours, and remember who is in -charge, not us – God alone.