

Tenants in Vineyard — Matthew 21:33-46

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵ "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

³⁸ "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

⁴¹ "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes"?

⁴³ "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."^[a]

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

There are a confusing number of people called Tom Holland. Tom Holland is the actor who plays Spiderman in the Marvel superhero films. But another Tom Holland a historian and author, who has written about the influence of both the Roman Empire and also Christianity throughout history. He is not a Christian, but nonetheless he asserts it is difficult to exaggerate the significance of Christianity on the modern western world view. Culturally, socially and ethically we owe far more to Christianity than any other influence.

The significant litmus of that change is this: the ancient world was impossibly cruel, violent and sexually unruly. Christianity changed that. Not overnight but gradually, Christianity challenged violence, misogyny, slavery, and the abuses of power. Christianity is the force that dares us to treat all people with equality, which made monogamy normative (and therefore significantly reduced the mistreatment of women), and which teaches us that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. In the Roman world violence was pretty much the right of the powerful, and this was reflected in their mythology, in which their gods were no more than powerful, violence and sexually active men and women. In *our* world violence is the shame of anyone — and this is so because Jesus was crucified, and because our God took no vengeance for this violence after the resurrection. The Christian God is one of peace. This has brought an extraordinary transformation in our behaviour. Nothing else has brought such massive cultural change.

The parable of the tenants in the vineyard follows directly on from last week's parable of the two sons. Again it is extraordinarily direct in its allegory. No one could fail to understand that the vineyard was Israel, that the tenants were the religious establishment, and that the various servants who came with messages from the landlord were the prophets.

It is absolutely true that the prophets were abused. Elijah spent much of his prophetic ministry in fear of Ahab and Jezebel, and had to run for his life several times. Jeremiah was variously

ill-treated by those who hated to hear his message, who accused him of treason and disloyalty for predicting the coming Babylonian victory. And Zechariah ben Jehoiada was murdered in the Jerusalem temple.

This parable is the first occasion that Jesus publicly implies that he is the son of God. When he talks of the landlord sending his son it is very clear what he is implying — and of course he is telling the very people who will conspire to kill him that he knows they will do this. When charges are levelled against Jesus, mere days after he tells this parable, they don't quote these words as such, but it is clear that this parable outraged the Sanhedrin and confirmed to them that he was a blasphemer in their eyes.

I don't know if it needs pointing out, but without the allegory, the meaning behind the narrative, the story is rubbish — no landowner would passively send servant after servant having seen the first one come away beaten, let alone send his son without heavies to go with him!

Another point of note — it is not Jesus who pronounced the violent retribution for the tenants. The priests and elders do themselves. So Jesus gets them to suggest what they themselves deserve — not yet having understood that the story is about them.

And finally, Jesus finishes by citing a famous line from psalm 118 — the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Now in Hebrew a son is 'ben' and a stone is 'eben'. So when Jesus swaps from the rejected son to the rejected stone, presumably quoting these lines in Hebrew, he is employing a well known pun to link the two.

The tenants in the vineyard directly challenges the violence of the religious establishment. Jesus observes something that they all know: that kings and authorities throughout Israel's history had reacted with violence against messages that later generations accepted were truly from God.

Then he extrapolates, telling them that they will also deal with *him* violently, and be wrong about that too. If they treat God's messengers with violence, it is not just their judgement that is problematic, but their violence.

They were prey to the 'myth of redemptive violence', as the American theologian, Walter Wink, coins it. This is the idea that violence is necessary and justified to contain or defeat great evil. We see it relentlessly in our stories — every James Bond film sees Bond's violence as good, while the villain's is bad. Superhero comics do the same; most action films, and many others too.

Can the bad thing — violence — become good?

Firstly, through the tenants in the vineyard, Jesus challenges the violence that fails to recognise God's voice. Mere days later, Jesus 'defeats sin' by falling victim to sin's violence. The script that the 'myth of redemptive violence' would write would be that he used his divine powers to strike down Herod and Pilate rather than be crucified. But God writes a different script and Jesus never descends to that. He dies, rises again, and continues to reveal God's love, instead of meting out the (violent) justice we suppose he should.

Early Christianity understood this. Remarkably, Christians died for telling their faith. They did not fight back. They understood that God did not want this.

As we read again this most violent of parables, what is God telling us about his gentleness? And our propensity to hurt others? And how to work with God to usher a deeper peace into the world, in the face of the persistence of violence?