

Gospel Mt 21.33-45 OS 28 HTK 4/9/2020 The Rev'd Robert Holland

Just like many of you I spend several hours each week walking through the streets of Kew. In High Street, and elsewhere, I'm always struck by the number of shops that are vacant and have a "For Lease" sign emblazoned across the front window. Clearly the tenants in these shops have not been able to keep up their rent in the midst of the pandemic and have moved out. But it's not just other people's shops, indeed one of the first places to close in Kew was Laurent in the Parish Centre and it seems as though they're not likely to open up again in the near future. All over Australia it's the same story, deserted shopping centres and suburban shopping strips with business closed and many shops vacant.

The response from governments at State and Federal level has been to encourage landlords and tenants to sit down together and work out a compromise, rent holidays or deferrals, lower rent, whatever meets both their needs. A well-known retailer, Solomon Lew, has threatened to close hundreds of his stores in shopping centres across Australia, unless their owners reduce his rents dramatically. In Melbourne currently the vacancy rate for houses and units is at an all-time high. Indeed, the unit I moved out of in Pakington Street over 3 months ago, to return to the Vicarage, is still vacant.

So, to today's Gospel, sometimes called the Wicked Tenants and the Vineyard. The parable echoes "The Song of the Vineyard" in Isaiah 5:1-7, especially v.2. While this is an echo, it is a revision of Isaiah's parable of the vineyard. In Isaiah's story, the vineyard itself goes bad, rending wild grapes and not cultivated grapes. In Jesus' story, the focus shifts to the keepers of the vineyard – those who are responsible for the cultivation and, in this case, the chief priests and

Pharisees (v.45). They of course would have been well aware of the echoes from Isaiah.

There is little question that the parable Jesus offers is told in the extreme. One cannot help but be outraged at the criminal behaviour of the tenants as he describes it and them now. For those of us listening in it is obvious that the owner of the vineyard has done everything to make their 'way of life' possible. He has planted the vines, placed a fence around it, put in the wine press and built a watch tower to protect it all. To be sure, the tenants are doing the day to day work, but none of that work would be theirs to do if someone else hadn't made it possible. One can hardly believe it when they murder not just one envoy of slaves, but two. When the owner's son meets the same fate, we find ourselves shaking our heads that those tenants could possibly believe the inheritance would then somehow actually be theirs to receive and enjoy. As though the owner could forget what was done to him.

The parable of the wicked tenants as it stands in Matthew, Mark, and Luke can be read as an allegory that emphasizes the murder of God's Son by Israel's leaders and the transfer of Israel's privileges to the church. However, this passage needs to be treated with great care by Christians. It began as a prophetic critique by a Jew to fellow Jews, designed not to damn Israel but to provoke repentance. In the course of Christian history, this passage and others like it became fuel for fires of anti-Semitism.

However one commentator counsels that while it is customary for 21st century Christians to read this story simply knowing that these people are evil and wrong, it may well be far too simplistic of an approach to this story (and, frankly, is intertwined with anti-Semitic

readings of the NT in general.) In the end, the chief priests and elders are horribly – even damnably – wrong, but not because they are Jews who believe Jewish things. Jesus rather is immersed in an ongoing argument throughout Israel's history of how God works in the world.

There are some parallels with our current situation in the midst of the pandemic, but surely not the assaults and murder. Yes, the parable Jesus offers now presents an extreme image. And yet, it is also so for you and for me. We forget that we are simply 'tenants' here. We fail to remember that everything we are and everything we think we 'own' are just on loan to us. These homes, acres, jobs, congregations, children, spouses, communities --- even our very bodies --- were created by God and given to us for this little span of time. And yet, how often do we behave as though it all 'belongs to me?' In a sense am we also not 'taking the lives of those sent to collect the rent' whenever we live as though it is all mine? Indeed, the flip side of that is that every day we fail to entrust it all to God, we are also taking on far more than we have intended to hold.

It is a hard word we hear today. It is an important word. And while it may not seem like it at first, it is also a life-giving word. You and I are here because of God's generosity and God's tender care. God planted the vineyard. And put in the fence. And the wine press. And the watch tower. God has given us all that we need. All we are asked to do is remember that. It is God's Vineyard. It is all gift. And even the remembering of this is meant to be a gift.

As with all of his parables Jesus was attempting to teach his followers then and now about the Kingdom of God. What is really means to say that God is in charge and that He reigns.

While we are preoccupied with net product, God is preoccupied with protection. While we seek to secure the harvest of our efforts, God insists that our harvest is not ours alone. That is, it's not our business to secure maximum yield. But it certainly is our business to tend the possibility of yield. And tending is no easy task.

The Kingdom of God does not work like the reign of the marketplace. What you do, who you are, is not for the sake of yourself, but for the sake of something beyond yourself. In the end, tending to the presence and potential of the Kingdom of God is not just about tending the vineyard, but tending something that is beyond your control. We have no idea what the yield will be. And the unsettling question of it all is what will you do with it?

God has bequeathed us the vineyard. God calls us to tending that is merciful and kind not rapacious and demanding. God needs us to move from speech that is mere passivity and consolation to prophetic preaching and action, that is about judgment and hope. To move beyond the tenants versus landlords stuff and to stress the God given nature of our vineyards.