Trinity 18A 04/10/26

My first ordained ministry placement in 1989 was as an assistant curate to a small church called St Mary Magdalene, in a small village called Ashford Carbonell in South Shropshire in the UK. The vicarage was on a large corner block. The hill in the backyard was badly eroded with wide grooves running down to a little stream. Shortly after I moved in I learned that the Woodland Trust would give away 100 broadleaf seedlings to anyone who would use them for soil conservation. I ordered the seedlings and went out one fine spring day to start planting sycamore and oak trees. I was on my hands and knees planting seedlings when a neighbour came over to see what I was up to. After I explained what I was doing, he said, "Well, I guess it makes sense… except that you don't own the house."

That was true. I didn't own the house. I didn't own much of anything. I had a few pieces of furniture, eight boxes of books and no debt- a precondition for ordination in the Church of England those days. It would be true to say that every vicarage the Newton's have lived in we have improved the house and garden- the house with the help of the parish, but the garden has always been our contribution. Its something instinctively we have done for the sake of God's creation as stewards.

Many of us start out that way, poor and renters. If we go back far enough, most of us can claim ancestors who were hired help working someone else's land. Many of our grandparents and great-grandparents didn't own anything to speak of, much less land. Many years before I planted those seedlings, I visited the old family village Colyton on my father's side in Devonshire. It stood on a hillside in a beautiful and rugged valley that looked as though it grew more rocks than crops. All of the people in that little valley in the Domesday Book had one of two of my family names- Newton. But the 1000-year-old family farm had a different name. Suddenly I realised why. My relatives were all poor. They had never owned that farm. They were serfs and later tenant farmers. They had tended someone else's land, brought in someone else's crops, and made a profit for someone else.

This is not the British or Australian way any more. We have moved from Serfs to Churls to use Anglo-Saxon terminology. Churl is where we get the word Churlish from… The Australian way is to own your own home on your own land, growing your own crops, and tending your own vegetable garden. Most of us in this country believe in ownership and independence. These are the values we have been taught and these are the values we strive to live by.

If we believe Jesus' parable, however, those are not really the values of the kingdom. Ownership of the vineyard is not the issue. This vineyard is not for sale and never will be. The owner isn't looking for buyers, he is looking for tenants, people who will give him his share of the crops at harvest time. This parable is about stewardship and that's a word that we are a little uncomfortable about. We would much rather talk about ownership.

You and I have worked hard for what we have. We have deeds, titles, fences, and hedges to prove our ownership. We have gone to a lot of trouble to get these things and we are proud of them. But, according to the parable, we are really fooling ourselves. Our ancestors became divine tenants so long ago that we have forgotten where it happened or when. Somewhere along the way someone lost the tenant's agreement and wrote up a deed instead. The landowner spent most of his time in another country, you see, so it didn't seem to matter.

When he finally sent messengers to remind the tenants of their agreement, they responded with violence and the messengers ran away. The owner could have sent the police or retaliated in some other way, but he did not. He just kept sending the messengers, each one pleading with the tenants to come to their senses and honour the agreement they have with the owner of the land.

Finally, when the cemetery is overflowing with dead messengers, the owner sends his son. The son came alone and unarmed hoping to teach the tenants something they had forgotten. He reminded them that ownership was a game they had made up. He told them that it was good to be tenants because tenants don't have to worry about responsibilities they can't handle. As tenants they had free access to more than they ever could have earned for themselves. Being a tenant is a good thing he said. It's like being a guest because it puts them in relationship with the owner and with each other. Once they quit playing the ownership game, their relationship can be based on gratitude, not competition so everything necessary for life could be shared. All the son asked was that they take care of the vineyard and give him a portion of what they produced. The son didn't need it, of course. He turned right around and gave it away to others because they needed it. The tenants needed to give in order to remember who they were: grateful guests who received their lives like the gifts they were and turned around and gave themselves to others. The tenants killed the son too but he would not stay dead. To this day he is still haunting the vineyard, reminding us that we are God's guests. We are welcome to everything on the earth as long as we remember who it belongs to and how to care for it.

I remember as a young server in Church aged about 12 holding aloft the offertory plate at the offertory and reading the inscription on it: *Of Thy Own Do We Give Thee.* 50 odd years later I am still working out exactly what that means.

We can love all of it as our own and water the flowers and plant the trees to stop erosion and enjoy the harvest. What we cannot do is ignore the owner or his messengers. That would be inviting disaster because it would mean we have forgotten who we are and where we have come from. We are God's tenant farmers. We care for the earth on behalf of someone else. We represent God's interests, being as generous with each other as God is with us. We are not owners. We were never meant to be. This is the way of God's kingdom and when the harvest finally comes, well, it will take your breath away. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton