

Sermon 8<sup>th</sup> October 2023, 08.30, BCP Holy Communion, All Saints' Cottenham  
Matthew 21.33-46. Alison Wedgbury, LLM

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

*33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'*

*42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:*

*"The stone that the builders rejected*

*has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?*

*43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

The Gospel reading today is one of Jesus's more forceful parables. It's a story about God's kingdom and the abuse by some people of a divine tenancy agreement. Stories make you see things differently, they help you understand quite complicated messages. They generally have a strong beginning, middle and end.

Here's a personal short story. In 2016 I drew up a tenancy agreement and let my home in Cottenham. I became a landlord for one year and went away until the end of 2017, not to another country as in the parable, just to another county, Devon, not the end of the world but quite a long distance from Cambridgeshire! I was living and working at the Sheldon Retreat in Devon and couldn't easily pop back every day to check on the house so an estate agent managed the tenancy for me. As a landlord for my own home, I knew it was precious to me as I wanted to come back and live here. Fortunately my tenants were very good and looked after the house and garden very well.

In Jesus's parable the tenants were frankly terrible. We hear that the owner trusted the chosen tenants to care for the vines, to oversee the grape harvest and help the vineyard flourish. But these tenants hatched a plan to take over the ownership for themselves. They killed various representatives of the owner and finally they killed the owner's son. Finally the vineyard was taken away from them and given to others who would do the right thing.

Now talking about a vineyard reminded Jesus's audience of a regular metaphor in Hebrew Scriptures. The vineyard nearly always meant Israel, God's precious land and people, in effect God's kingdom on earth. God is the owner in this parable and there are parallels in Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80 which are also about the misuse of vineyards. Other metaphors in Scripture are in the parable too, the Stone and Son. The Cornerstone represents Christ. The stone both holds up a building and can also can wipe away wrongdoing by its strength. In Hebrew that reference to a stone is a play on words: 'Ben' is 'Son' i.e. Jesus and 'Eben' is 'Stone'.

The original audience and Matthew's readers would recognise characters in their own day. The early Christians knew that God's Son and heir, Jesus, had been killed by the Romans in collusion with some of the senior priests and Pharisees. The wicked tenants represented not the innocent workers or the owner's slaves, but those in charge of religious life in Israel, i.e. some of the chief priests and Pharisees.

Everyone present at the time would know the history of many Jewish prophets in the past who had challenged those in power with drastic consequences for themselves. Most recently John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin, had been killed for that very reason. Matthew tells us that even the chief priests and Pharisees had a significant moment of self-awareness: verse 45 *"they realised that he was speaking about them"* and verse 46 *"they feared the crowds because they regarded (Jesus) as a prophet."*

It has to be said that unlike some other parables, there's almost nothing nice or comfortable about this story's beginning, middle and end. There's a lot of violence involved, both by the wicked tenants and, also apparently, by God as the owner or landlord. In the middle of the Gospel passage Jesus explains in strong terms the consequences of misusing religious power and abusing those sent by God: verse 43 *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom"*.

That's the positive message of hope in the end. God, in the person of Jesus, had come to replace the world view of the wicked tenants with a new story, a new vision of God's kingdom.

This parable has a lot to say about how we should live as Christians today and it helps us decide to do things differently in future. We often assume that Jesus' ministry was all about love, compassion and forgiveness and that certainly was his ministry towards individuals in need. Yet in the Gospel parable and elsewhere, Jesus was highly critical of agents of injustice who were protecting their powers and prestige.

We are very fortunate locally to have some wonderful religious leaders in the Christian Church. But of course there have been in the past examples of the misuse of power and abuse of others. We have to accept that many Christian leaders in the past used the Bible to justify the transatlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native Americans and First Nation Australians, holocausts against Jews and many other horrors.

Today there is a strong emphasis in the Church of England on safeguarding processes. Safeguarding is for everyone and everyone is liable to be held to account, church leaders perhaps most of all. Not locally, but not far from here, there have been examples of charismatic church leaders misusing their power over young people. Abuse can take many forms, including spiritual abuse, and it is very important that they are held to account.

The parable in today's Gospel is a reminder that we are all responsible for the life of the church. We are all co-tenants in God's kingdom in God's wonderful vineyard. God is our landlord, not the churchwardens, the curate, the vicar, archdeacon, bishop or Archbishop. Fortunately there are many many positive signs of good tenancy today. In our own villages we have committed to '*Leading Your Church Into Growth*', to '*Eco-Church*' and to '*Reimagining*' our church buildings. We are increasing our focus on Bible study, on exploration of faith, on individual and collective prayer.

That is so encouraging! Gradually all this will enable God's local virtual vineyard in Cottenham and Rampton to bear more and more good fruit. It enables our gaze to lift upwards to God and to overcome human problems with confidence.

A final prayer. Dear God,

- help us to be good tenants of your virtual vineyard today
- help us to be your Church on earth, growing together in peace
- help us to take safeguarding seriously and challenge people who abuse their power over others
- help us all to love and encourage one another as you have loved us
- help us to be followers of Jesus and to learn more each day about you.

**Amen.**