

Sunday 4 October 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer: *(Based on Matt. 21:33-46)*

Holy God, Maker of heaven and earth,
out of your great love for the world
you sent us your beloved Son—
but we sent him to his death.
Have mercy on us, O Lord;
forgive us, renew us, restore us
so that we may be the people of your vineyard
and bear good fruit for your holy realm;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

(FOW Worship)

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 21:33-46

The parable of the tenants

³³ 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round 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 in 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 marvellous 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.'

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.

(NIVUK)

Sermon:

Last Sunday, we read about that incident when Jesus threw the money changers and traders out of the Temple: they had made the Temple a place for making a profit when it was meant to be a place for making prayer.

In the Gospel reading we saw how Jesus' actions angered the Chief Priests, and the other religious leaders. We saw how determined they were to oppose Jesus, so much so that when on the following day Jesus returned to the Temple to teach, the Chief Priests and religious Leaders came to challenge Him.

They wanted to know by whose authority Jesus did what He did for they knew that they had not endorsed Him.

To paraphrase, 'Are you properly accredited? Do you have a degree in theology? Have you been ordained and do you have the backing of a recognized synagogue? (Or Church for the Christian).

Jesus had none of these. Why? He did not need them; it borders on blasphemy to ask such questions of the Omniscient One. He alone among all men and women had not only the knowledge and wisdom but also the right to teach, and these were not things given Him by some puny human institution, they were inherent in His person.

Rather than asking Him by what authority He did these things, the Chief Priests ought to have sat at His feet and feasted on His every word. Instead, they presume He is a nobody a jumped up little Rabbi from an insignificant town and who has no backing from any 'recognized' authority.

In short, they think they knew more than Him, after all they had the training, and the backing of the Religious Authorities. What on earth could Jesus teach them? Little did they realize (or they refused to accept) that He was the only one who could bring true Heavenly teaching to earth.

If they had acknowledged that Jesus' authority was Divine, they would have prostrated themselves before Him, and in reverence they would have been unable to speak.

After confounding the High Priests with His answer to their question, Jesus tells them two parables, one of which we considered last Sunday, that of The Two Sons.

A father had asked his two sons, one after the other to do something, the first said, 'no,' but later relented and did as his father had asked. The second son said, 'yes,' and even showed great respect in doing so, for he says, 'yes sir,' but he had no intention of doing as his father asked and did not obey.

Jesus tells the religious leaders that they are like the second son, in that they showed outward respect to God, but did not truly respect Him, nor love Him, fear Him, because they did not obey Him.

Now to leave the Religious Leaders in no doubt as to their disobedience, their apostasy, and their insistence on going their own way, Jesus tells them another Parable; the Parable of The Wicked Tenants.

This is a parable, which has its background in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the theme would have been familiar to the Religious Leaders.

Jesus takes a passage from the Book of Isaiah the Prophet Chapter 5 verses 1-7 and He develops it.

The song of the vineyard

5 'I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
my loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

² He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

³ 'Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

⁴ What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?

⁵ Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.

⁶ I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.'

⁷ The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.'

By using this passage, Jesus is taking a familiar story from the Hebrew Scriptures, something that the Religious Leaders could not object to. The meaning of the passage from Isaiah had been clear to the religious leaders of Israel, they understood the Vine Grower to be a reference to the LORD God and the vines, to be a reference to His people, the Jews.

In the parable Jesus told, there is a Householder who plants a vineyard, and just like the owner of the vineyard in Isaiah Chapter 5, he protects it by setting a hedge or a wall around it and building a tower. He leases the vineyard to tenants and goes off to another country.

When it came time for the harvest, he sent his servants to collect his rent and share of the profits. Well the tenants were having none of this; they seized the servants, then beat one, killed another and stoned a third.

These tenants were not prepared to share their profits and thought that the owner was so far away he could do little to force them.

But more servants were sent and the tenants treated them the same way. Finally the vineyard owner after an amazing display of forbearance sends his own son, thinking to himself surely they will respect my son.

But these are the tenants from Hell, and when they saw the son they were inflamed with the thought of gaining his inheritance so they seized him and killed him. Fools! Did they really think that the owner would allow them to have his son's inheritance and to go unpunished for murdering him? (Well in the parable, it seems so).

After telling the parable, Jesus asks the Religious Leaders a very simple question.

"When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

The answer could be nothing other than that which they gave, not unless that is, they wanted to look foolish in the eyes of the people.

'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.'

The Parable is also a bit like an allegory in that the characters in it represent characters in real life.

It is clear that the wicked tenants in the parable represent the ordinary spiritual guides of the people; the religious leaders under whose care, teaching and influence the fruits of righteousness were expected to grow.

God had entrusted the spiritual care of Israel to spiritual guides, yet time and again, they had broken this trust, misled God's people and

even led them into sin (e.g. Aaron the High priest making the golden calf for the people to worship, whilst Moses was on the holy mountain with the Lord. You can read about this in Exodus 32).

Now just when the season of the first fruits was drawing near and Israel should have been ripe and spiritually mature, the owner of the vineyard, representing the LORD God sent servants to get His fruit, that which was His by right.

In this parable the owner of the vineyard represents the LORD, the servants represent the prophets and the other extraordinary messengers that He raised up and sent to Israel from time to time and the tenants represent the religious leaders, who in their pride had silenced the voices of God's messengers.

Consider the prophet Jeremiah, who in the sixth century BC prophesied that the Chaldeans would capture Jerusalem and that his own priestly town of Anathoth would be destroyed.

Neither the political leaders nor the religious leaders liked what Jeremiah had to say, and they persecuted him, they had him beaten, and thrown into prison.

And what of the prophet Zechariah in the fifth century BC? He prophesied and preached a message to which the political and religious leaders took great exception. Because Zechariah had denounced Israel for forsaking the LORD, king Joash ordered the people to stone him to death (See 2 Chronicles 24:21).

Time and again God had sent faithful messengers to point Israel in the right direction and to encourage them to give God His place, and time and again Israel silenced them. Yet God in His forbearance sent messenger after messenger giving the people of Israel ample opportunity to repent and to return to Him.

Eventually the owner of the vineyard (representing God) sent his own son, surely they will respect him and listen to him? No! They were having none of this. They seize the son and kill him.

By telling this parable Jesus is telling the religious leaders that that is exactly what they are about to do. As the tenants in the parable seemed not to care about what the owner would do, so the religious leaders seemed blind to the consequences of their rebellious rejection and murder of the Son (Jesus the Son of God).

Could Jesus make it any clearer that He is the son in the parable, the rightful heir of the vineyard, that is Israel and that He is indeed the Messiah?

From their response it is obvious that the religious leaders would not even think it possible that Jesus could be the long awaited Messiah, if it were true, where would that leave them and their standing in the nation? What of their high position, power and prestige? What of Religion as they knew it?

What of the Kirk, indeed the whole church in its many expressions in our country? Fewer and fewer people are attending worship within Church buildings and fewer and fewer are claiming any connection or interest in the Church.

Secularist and humanist ideologies are growing rapidly, people are becoming more interested and engaged in politics, (which in itself is not necessarily at odds with the Christian faith), but seem more interested in manifestos for the moment, than in the good news of the Good News (The Gospel).

In affluent societies, many have become more interested in having fun and even 'safe,' adventure, than in exercising faith. Many are more interested in momentary pleasures than in spiritual renewal. (We can pray that the current Pandemic might help correct some of these dangerous trends): 'Well its understandable isn't it? After all the demands of the Gospel are rather tedious and even hard. There's not much fun to be found there.'

If only such people knew the depth of the goodness, joy, peace, love, and excitement and yes, even fun, that is to be found in Christ, they would be less interested in the momentary pleasures of this mortal life.

Why has our country come to such a stage where many are turning away from the Church and even Christ? The reasons are many and too complicated for this writer to presume to give a comprehensive answer, but the following are some suggested reasons from Scripture and factors from the life of the Church.

Surely we can begin by acknowledging what Jesus taught. He told His disciples that, where His followers seek to live for Him, there would be opposition, even persecution. If the Universal Church is assailed by Secularism, Humanism, Atheism, and outright opposition, then we can hardly be surprised if the Church in Scotland suffers from the blows of these 'alternatives' to Jesus.

A possible reason, which has contributed, to the decline of the Kirk might be that it has become so bureaucratic that congregations have had their spiritual life stifled by the weeds of legislation and administration. Our Elders are now also Trustees and it is the administrative and governance role of Trustee that often occupies the time of Elders, rather than the spiritual and pastoral care that has for centuries been associated with that role. This is not to say that administration and governance are unspiritual, but when they become the main focus, they push aside the time for prayer, pastoral care, spiritual oversight, and evangelism.

We have found in our own case, that often our Kirk Session meetings have no time to deal with anything other than fabric and governance matters.

Perhaps another possible reason why the Kirk is suffering a decline has to do with its Ministry, i.e. its Ministers, in other words it's 'religious leaders.'

Have they (and I include myself in all that follows) been faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures? Have they handled the scriptures reverently, trying to expound what is found in them? Or have they used the Scriptures to support their own cherished views and opinions? Have they lived the life that Christ expects of those He has placed in positions of trust? Have they been the examples of meek humility and yet remained undaunted in their proclamation of the Gospel?

Those who are Ministers in the Kirk need always, to take a long and honest look at themselves, at their walk with God, their faithfulness to Christ and their chief motivations.

Have they been faithful messengers, seeking to bring God's word to His people without editing it to suite their own liking or to indulge the preferences of their audience? (Remember, Jeremiah and Zechariah?).

Perhaps the 'religious leaders' of our day will have more to answer for than they/we think. No one should presume to be teachers in the Church, because as James reminds us in Ch3: 1-2 of his letter,

'Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

(This warning from James is something that ought to be born in mind by all who have any teaching ministry in the Church).

No Minister can get everything right, but surely they must strive to pass on as faithfully as they are able, the message of the Gospel given to us all in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. (Our Old Testament is in fact the Hebrew Scriptures).

There are of course many faithful voices calling people to Christ and the things of Christ, but often these are shouted down, or even silenced, especially in some places in the world where even to claim to be a believer in Jesus Christ brings fearful opposition and persecution.

One day the owner of the vineyard will return, and when He does, there will be a reckoning.

Pray God, that we will not be as the rebellious tenants, but will be faithful in giving God what is His by right, the first fruits of our lives and indeed, our very selves.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen!

Prayers of Intercession:

Let us pray for the needs of the world, saying,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your love work in us, that we may be saved.
For your beloved, chosen people,
the vine you brought out of Egypt,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

For the church of Jesus Christ,
your beloved Son,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for martyrs, saints, and prophets:
For all who are persecuted for doing your will,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

For all who are suffering,
through sickness or oppression,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

For the coming of your kingdom,
with justice and peace for all,
God of hosts, **hear our prayer.**

Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven and see;
have regard for your people;
through Christ, the vine,
in whom we are branches. **Amen.**

(FOW worship)

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!