8th October 2023, Matthew 21 33-46, by Dr Maxwell Reid

When people in authority challenged Jesus, he often responded to their challenges with a parable. If those people challenging him didn’t quite understand the first parable, he’d give them a second one. Today’s Gospel addressed to the challenge posed by the chief priests and elders about the source of Jesus’ authority. This time, the parable of the Tenant Farmers is a story that, when given some thought, really transpires to be about something else.

Yes, it is a little bit cryptic, but it had a hidden meaning because it actually applied to Jesus himself.  If that is so, then the parable becomes an interesting parallel interpretation, where the vineyard owner was viewed as God, the tenants were the religious leaders of Israel, the servants were God's prophets. The son was Jesus himself.

Once again, Jesus was emphasising his constant fundamental reminder, that only God the Creator owns everything, and we are simply tenants leasing out the world, with the talents God has granted us, to be used for the greater good in his kingdom.

The parable begins with a situation that was business as usual in Roman-occupied Palestine.

A landowner established a vineyard complete with a fence, a winepress, and even a watchtower. He then became an absentee landowner, as often happened in the far-flung territories of the Roman Empire. Tenants were in charge of overseeing the productivity of the vineyard and paying their rent to the owner at harvest time, in the form of a share of the produce. So far, so good: business was working as usual. Then everything came apart!

When the owner’s slaves arrived to collect his share of the produce, the tenants attacked them, even beating one and killing another. The owner of the vineyard then simply sent another delegation of slaves to collect the rent.

Those slaves were treated even worse than the first. You would think that by now the owner would have sent in troops, or some form of armed enforcement of his rights! Jesus asked his audience (the chief priests and elders), “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” The answer was obvious, lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” But no, instead he sent his son, thinking by some logic that the thugs who have abused two delegations of slaves will respect the owner’s son and heir. As it transpired, it was not a clever idea because the tenants’ half-baked reasoning was that if they killed the son, they would get his inheritance. Apparently unaware of how ridiculous their notion is, they killed the son.

So how did these listeners at the time receive this story? The chief priests and elders might have seen themselves in the role of the landowner. Thus, they would be able to own land, and to have others manage it for them while they were busy with their administrative tasks in Jerusalem. They could interpret the story with the view of the servants as their subordinates and themselves as the real victims of the unscrupulous tenants.

Christian theologians, on the other hand, read the parable differently. common interpretation is that Jesus expects us to see God as the landowner and the temple leaders as the thoroughly evil tenants, who are defrauding God of the rightful fruits of God’s covenant with Israel. The groups of servants are Israel’s prophets and Jesus is the son.

Matthew’s readers are intended to see themselves as the “other tenants” to whom the “vineyard” will be given after it is taken from the Jerusalem leaders who have not managed it well. From Matthew’s perspective, the point of depicting Jesus who would be crucified outside of Jerusalem, as the son who was killed outside of the vineyard, this parable reads as an opening salvo from Jesus himself, justifying his claims against the Jewish leaders and even against Judaism as a whole.

Jesus’ collision with the Jerusalem leadership is a thread running through the whole Gospel. The arguments between them were not only about religious practices, but about the temple leaders’ collusion with the exploitative economic and social policies of the Roman Empire at that time.

This exchange between Jesus and the chief priests and elders was set in Jerusalem in the last week of Jesus’ ministry. This final section of the Gospel before the passion narrative gazes in hindsight at Jesus’ own life and ministry, and at the church that will continue his witness to God’s reign after Jesus’ approaching death, and resurrection.

So why is God’s reign compared to landowning activities? Is it simply Jesus’ theological belief that God “owns” all the land. The story envisages the process of building a vineyard and tenanting it, pointing to God’s care in forming Israel. A series of servants come to collect some of the owner’s fruit but are treated abominably. The son who is killed clearly alludes to Jesus himself, a statement of his divine authority and yet another prediction of his death.

Our Lord's words are reminiscent of the Prophet Isaiah's when he spoke of the nation of Israel being carefully prepared by God to be His fruitful vineyard yet here they failed to acknowledge the Lord's right over them by treating his messengers and message with contempt.

If you can imagine the church as a vineyard, a common analogy in several parables, Christ established his vineyard the Church and put it into our hands.

Christ has entrusted us with his work, with what he values. He gives us a job to do by means of a totally new structure of which Jesus himself is the “cornerstone.” That structure is God’s reign or empire, which Jesus has been proclaiming from the beginning of his ministry and which it is hoped the church will continue to proclaim in Jesus’ name.

Those who believe in God and Jesus can recognise the marvellousness of Jesus, the cornerstone of our salvation. We are to produce the fruit of lives, of praise, loving service, and witness. We must not fail in our tenancy of the land gifted to us by God. We must strive to keep the gospel of Christ alive in this world and take good care of our world.

The Bible explains that the world was created perfect, without evil or suffering. However, that perfection has been continually negated as we have chosen, albeit it unintentionally, to threaten the very existence of this planet. In years gone by successive inventions have changed the way we live. For example, the telephone enabled the construction of hi-rise buildings. The invention of first the bicycle, followed by the automobile, has enabled us to live a long way from our place of work with the creation of suburbs.

However, much of that change was done with little or no thought of its impact on God’s creation. Gradually, over time, succeeding generations have managed to trash this planet, and in recent years the horrific global weather changes are becoming more salient. It is urgently up to us and coming generations to reduce the risk to the planet in any way we can.

As tenants of God’s vineyard, we are expected to be responsible in our actions, producing fruitful harvests of faith, while ensuring that the world we inhabit can continue to reflect the healthy environment humans were gifted. So far, we have not been responsible stewards or tenants, which has increased the challenges we now face of convincing people that Jesus brings good news to all who believe in him.
Amen.