

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!
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Sunday 4th October 2020 – The Parable of the Tenants

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

Well folks, that's the third of our midweek services past since we re-opened our Church building for worship. As I have said in previous podcasts, it has been good to see folk coming along for a short act of worship, sharing some "socially distanced" fellowship. And yet, even though we sit two metres apart from each other, wear masks and aren't allowed to sing hymns - it is amazing how a sense of belonging to each other can be found.

These last several months have helped us to see just how much we share in common. They've helped us to understand each other in a different way and that is something that we are going to need, I suspect, even more during the uncertain months ahead.

So, just a quick reminder – if you want to come along to one of these midweek services a phone call or an email to the manse will secure you a place.

Alongside this, by the time you hear this Podcast, the Kirk Session will also have met again to discuss the subject of opening for Sunday worship in the not too distant future and you should be hearing from your elder soon about what decisions have been made about that.

This week, however, we are following the set readings for the day from the lectionary – the challenging and powerful "*Parable of The Tenants*" – the tenants who aggressively reject every approach from the owner of the vineyard to share the vineyards produce.

It's one of Jesus' more uncompromising parables - teaching us about the sad reality of rejection and anger, but also reminding us about the wonderful reality of divine love, patience and persistence.

We'll think more about that in a moment, though. First of all, perhaps we should pray. **Let us pray.**

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Sovereign God, great and wonderful, almighty and all powerful, we praise you that you are greater than our minds can grasp – higher than our highest thoughts, beyond expression in words.

We praise you that you are the source of all that is and has been, that you are at work in the world and in our lives, always seeking to fulfil your purposes, never resting until your work is accomplished.

And we praise you that you came into our world in Christ Jesus, and that through him you come to us again and again, revealing your love, renewing our faith, showing your mercy, giving us life.

Forgive us, therefore, that we have not always appreciated all that you have done – we have not kept our first sense of wonder at your greatness; we have not given you the praise that is rightfully yours; we have presumed to limit you to our own expectations; we have been closed to your Holy Spirit's prompting and have kept Christ at arm's length when his challenge has disturbed us.

And yet, you have shown constant mercy and grace to us, forever reaching out your hand to us.

Come to us now in this time of worship and, through your mercy, give us guidance for the days ahead. Help us to grow stronger in our faith and more committed in our discipleship, more faithful in our service until Christ is known among all people's everywhere.

These our prayers we bring to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say and to pray, saying...

*Our Father
who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done, on 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.*

Bible Reading – Matthew chapter 21 verses 33 to 46

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.*

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

What a shame Charles Stiles wasn't about in Jesus' day to sort out the mess of the Vineyard Tenants who wouldn't uphold their side of the bargain to share their crop with the vineyard owner.

Hold on a minute, I hear you say...! Who on earth is Charles Stiles? Well, Charles Stiles runs a big company in America known as "*Business Evaluation Services*" and one of their specialities is to provide mystery shoppers and covert surveillance for business owners who suspect that their staff – or suppliers... or both - are up to no good.

Indeed, you can see Charles at work in a TV programme called "*Mystery Diners*" which you can find on the Food Network Channel (that's Freeview channel 41 or Sky channel 140, folks!).

In it we see beleaguered restaurant and bar owners calling Charles and his team to investigate why on earth, despite their business being busy, that they are making less money than they expected. So, after an initial consultation, the team set up secret cameras and sound recording devices all over the premises, including the kitchen and the backdoor... even, sometimes, in the fridges! There's no-where for anyone to hide and the rest of the programme is spent with Charles and the owners taking cover in a nearby building as they watch what unfolds.

So, over the course of the series we find staff members handing out too many free drinks... closing premises early so that they can have their friends' round... We've seen kegs of beer being sold on the side at the back door of the bar and secret recipes shared with other business owners. There have been scams where waiters pocket money for themselves and offer false discount deals... and, of course, there are just downright rude staff who hector customers that have the temerity to make even the mildest complaint.

It's all a bit forced, to be honest, and some scenarios seem quite extreme but the net result is always the same – the recalcitrant staff member, or members, are summonsed to the boss, mostly leading to some very prompt and inglorious sackings.

Perhaps, if we continue the analogy, Charles Stiles could have sorted out the vineyard tenants for the vineyard owner... or perhaps not!

You see, all of this assumes that the vineyard owner would know, when he approaches these tenants, that they are not going to hand over the produce as promised.

I mean, it's one thing for a bar or restaurant owner to have suspicions about duplicitous behaviour behind their backs.

They can check balance sheets and inventories.

They can count the number of customers served and see that there are anomalies.

They might not be able to exactly pinpoint where the problem lies, but they know that something is brewing in the background, that there is a story waiting to be told.

But what if the Vineyard owner hasn't a clue that something is up? What if he sends his first representative to the vineyard in complete innocence believing that they will get what they went for?

In such circumstances there doesn't seem much that even Charles Stiles could do. Covert operations might confirm suspicions that something is wrong. They are not, maybe, so good when there is not even a hint of something bad happening in the background.

And that, it seems, is what is happening here. It seems highly unlikely that, if the Vineyard owner had even the remotest inkling that his servants were about to be treated so reprehensibly, that he would have sent them there in the first place... or at least sent them without sufficient backup to get his produce and, perhaps, even put them off the land forever.

Let's have a look at the story in a bit more detail. As several commentators point out this Parable of Jesus is one of only a handful of parables that can be found in all three of what we call the "*synoptic gospels*" – that's Matthew, Mark and Luke. The only other parables to have that same status are the *parable of the Sower* and the parable of our faith growing like a *Mustard Seed*.

Not even, points out one preacher, the famous parables of the *Good Samaritan* or the *Prodigal Son* gets that same prominence, even although they are – to most of us – far better known.

So, the fact that all three writers include this parable of Jesus, tells us of the importance of how they see what Jesus says here.

So why, we might ask, do they choose this parable as one of the very few to have such prominence?

The answer to that comes within the first few lines of the parable itself.

Listen again to the description that Jesus gives of the Vineyard at Matthew chapter 21 and verse 33...

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower".

It's the level of detail that's most interesting here.

In the parable of the *Good Samaritan*, for example, we are simply told that a man went on a journey between Jerusalem and Jericho. Jesus doesn't say anything about the road he walks or the flowers and plants he might have seen as he journeyed. Even the sights and sounds around him never get a mention. And that's the usual way that Jesus tells stories... using just enough words to help us fill the missing bits of the image for ourselves. That's how they engage our minds.

But here, Jesus is very precise – precise about the vineyard, the wall, the winepress and even the watchtower.

The original hearer of these words, however, would have heard something at the back of what Jesus says here - words taken almost without change from the prophet Isaiah at chapter 5, a passage that also references vineyards.

Let's hear the opening words of Isaiah chapter 5 – verses 1 and 2:

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 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”.

The rest of that passage from Isaiah speaks about how God was going to clear the vineyard and about its ultimate demise. Despite everything being put in place for its success, it has not produced the fruit that it should have.

And who, we might ask, does the Vineyard represent?

Well, it's clear from Isaiah's words that he means the people of Israel. Isaiah is taking the biggest challenge of all directly to the very people of God, God's chosen people.

He's basically telling them that God is not happy at the amount of so called “*fruit*” that they have grown, despite all that God has provided them with.

So, when Jesus begins his parable with these words, his original hearers start to really sit up and listen.

Does this mean, they ponder, that Jesus is now taking these words, dusting them off a bit, and then repeating them as still applying to them... to the religious leaders of the day?

Well, at verse 45 of our reading, that – it seems – is exactly how they understand Jesus' words. Matthew informs us, and I quote here, that “*they knew he was talking about them*”.

They knew that Jesus was using the image of the servants being assaulted, even murdered, by the tenants was a reference to the way that God has sent – on several occasions - people to bring them back to him and yet who had been utterly rejected.

The new addition to the story here is, however, the part where the Vineyard owner finally sends his Son to see if he can achieve what the others could not achieve. And yet the response of the tenants, at verses 35 and 36 of our reading, was simply to do the same to the Son as they had done to the rest of the servants.

And they did what they did because they thought that, without his only Son, the vineyard owner would have no one else to leave his land to and therefore they, as the sitting tenants, would inherit the land instead.

Jesus' words are even more powerful given the moment in which they are spoken because, as Jesus tells this parable, he has just arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He has already turned over the trader's tables in the temple courtyard and has already cursed a fig tree that bore no fruit.

By this point, Jesus is holding back no longer. He could not have been any clearer even if he had simply told them all of this in plain language, rather than as a story.

What they were about to do, within a matter of days, was to simply do again what others had done again and again and again. Jesus speaks so clearly, even though he knows it will not change what was going to happen to him.

Wow! Things can't get any more pointed than this, can they?

Well - not really... This is Jesus at his most directly expressive and yes, he is talking to a group of people, and they know who they are... and they are not happy, not even one tiny bit.

But let's not forget that there may be aspects of the parable that are not so distant from us either.

Every time we want to keep the so called *vineyard* to ourselves – we hear Jesus' words.

Any moment we want to keep the walls up and the doors locked around the *vineyard* – we hear Jesus' words.

When fear of change or growing up makes us wince and wonder if we could just hold things as they are, even for a little while longer – well, that's when we hear Jesus' words to us, at their most pointed and their most challenging.

It is just as well, therefore, that the Vineyard owner – God himself - is so incredibly persistent and patient with his people.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, we admit that we find parables such as the one we have been thinking about today, deeply challenging to us. They lead us to ponder our openness to your promptings... our willingness to open doors and our ability to respond to your call.

As we bring these our prayers to you at this time we pray for those places in the world, and in our society, where folk attempt to do work that is good and positive and yet who find themselves stymied by a lack of openness to transformative ways of thinking and doing. Inspire creative thinkers to continue thinking creatively and to find encouragement in the small achievements and small steps that they make.

We pray for your Church and for the welcome that it gives to others who are seeking Christ in their lives. When folk come to the door of our own so called "*Vineyards*" may they find welcome and never rejection... affirmation and never disapproval... tenderness and never hostility.

Lord, open the ears and eyes of your Church so that we might see your approach to us – the approach of the stranger in need... the approach of the prophet with words of challenge but most especially the approach of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. May we always welcome Jesus into our midst.

Father, we pray at this time for our world as it continues to face the challenges of these ongoing days of uncertainty. As we have often prayed in these recent months, we pray for those who support people through times of illness, in whatever capacity that may be, as we remember those who find themselves in need of such support. And, as draw these our prayers to a close, we pray for any whom we know that are in need of the tender approach of Jesus at this time.

Bless all for whom we have prayed as we ask you to receive our prayers – both spoken and unspoken – in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

Living God, we have come to you this day to seek your help, to offer our worship and declare our faith. Now we go for you, to work for your kingdom, proclaim your love and make known the gospel of Jesus Christ. Go with us and grant us grace to serve you, even as through him you have served us.

And may the blessing of God almighty - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – be with you now and for evermore, Amen