

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 27 Year A 2020

This peculiar time we have been living through – and will continue to live through for a while yet – has brought into sharp relief the relationship of the churches with the state. Now, in the church it's very easy to bemoan the fact - and it is a fact - that our culture has, by and large, rejected the Christian message. Christian life, its teachings, its belief, its worship, and its great figures, now appear on the fringe of our culture. If we need yet a further sign of this, across much of this country, we are still locked out of our churches while other comparable gathering spaces are open. In response to Corona virus, across the country, there are gross inconsistencies in the way the church is dealt with and other sectors are dealt with. The faith is not seen as important. We are being treated merely as materialistic creatures, as if our health and our bodies and the natural order were the only thing that mattered. Our spiritual lives and our spiritual health and the supernatural order barely raises an eyebrow. Accommodating the needs of Christians is not seen as a priority. Our message, our life has been rejected. I've said it before and it's probably worth saying again, the sooner we realise this and adjust our life accordingly the better. We need to accept this and create resilient communities that will be able to withstand the hostile environment about us.

In light of this, then, we might find the gospel text placed before us today as some sort of comfort. Jesus, at his strident and belligerent best, once more giving the chief priests and elders a verbal punch in the form of the parable we hear today. And we might imagine ourselves standing behind Jesus' shoulder and saying, you get 'em Jesus! See! See, what you get if you reject him!' Except that the parable today is *not* addressed to 'society in general.' Not even a society that has abandoned its Christian heritage. The warning against rejecting God and his anointed messengers is directed at *people of faith*. The evangelist certainly could not envisage the secular ideology that surrounds us. The gospel text tells us that Jesus addresses chief priests and the elders, the representatives of faith. So, the gospel text today is not saying, 'Oh be careful of the big, bad world out there that will reject the message of the gospel.' It is *not* a text which speaks to the situation in which a culture rejects and turns its back on its Christian foundations. It is a text which stands as a warning to us, as a church, as people of faith. It is a word to us to remain vigilant, to take the gospel seriously, to take Jesus seriously.

It is certainly far easier to wag our finger at the culture around us, to lament how much it has departed from its Christian heritage. But the gospel is addressed to us. It is a challenge for us. It a warning for us, that as people of faith, as followers of Jesus, we not reject his message.

Now, the imagery and motifs our Lord draws on in the text today come directly from the ancient and noble tradition of the prophet Isaiah. This is why today we also hear a portion of the fifth chapter of Isaiah which sets out the key image of the vineyard. *Let me sing to my friend the song of his love for his vineyard.* In the original Hebrew, this portion *is* a song, or at least written verse. And this might help moderate some of the mental images we have of the prophets. We might imagine them as sort of long-haired firebrands. But Isaiah at least was a poet. And sometimes the most important things - the most true things - are best be expressed in song.

And the prophet here *is* addressing something important. Written in the 8th century BC this early part of the prophecy looks to the looming threat of Assyria, the emerging empire who would eventually sweep down and envelop the northern Kingdom of Israel, so that they in fact become lost to history. Isaiah perceives this threat. He is writing from the southern Kingdom Judah, centred on Jerusalem. Isaiah writes to warn the people of this menacing threat. And it is the central, interpretative framework that is carried through all the prophetic books, that it is fidelity to covenant relationship with God that determines the fate of the God's people. Infidelity, unfaithfulness, neglecting and *rejecting* the covenant God has established with his chosen people, has consequences. Not that this is a case of God vindictively punishing those who mess up and turn away from him. No. Turning from God, walking away from him, rejecting him, carries with it its own consequences.

So, Isaiah imagines this covenant relationship as a kind of paradise restored: a vineyard on a fertile hill, dug and cleared and planted with choice vines. It is supposed to be a place of safety, of order, of life. But as we hear, instead it yields wild grapes, sour grapes. The force of this text centres on the question, *What could I have done for my vineyard, that I have not done?* God had done everything to establish his people in order, safety and life. And yet, and yet, it is rejected. And in time, too, Isaiah himself and his message would be rejected.

The first hearers of the gospel would surely have identified Isaiah when Jesus says: *the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third*. Jesus speaks this hard word to remind the religious authorities that that too was their heritage. And the same question Isaiah asks, *what could I have done that I have not done*, we should hear asked from Jesus' lips. What more could God have done for us than in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord?

But how many in the church, even today, like the chief priests and elders who rejected Jesus, reject him still. It is surely the troubling legacy of liberalism in the church that everything God has done in Jesus, if not explicitly rejected, then at least tamed and stripped of their saving power. The miracles of Jesus: rejected. The full scope of his teaching: rejected. His ministry of healing and exorcism: rejected. His life-giving resurrection: rejected. The graces of the sacraments: rejected. The truth of his word: rejected. The witness of the apostles: rejected. And this from within the church! From priests and preachers, bishops and theologians! Hiding behind their scholarship and sophistication they explain away all that God has done in and through our Lord until nothing worth believing in is left.

But as the gospel, and the Isaiah prophecy, makes quite clear today, it is not those who reject the Lord and his messengers who receive the inheritance. They have rejected it! They have no part of it! *Those wretches will be brought to a wretched end*. Those who have sought to – and seek! – to dismantle the faith *God himself* has revealed to us in Jesus Christ we must say, in our Lord's own words, have no share in the Kingdom.

But in the supreme mystery of the gospel, that which is rejected is the cornerstone. That is where our comfort lies! Certainly not in getting with the program. And that is where the revisionists so miss the mark. In re-writing the Christian faith, they miss out on it altogether. But we too must remain attentive - alert - so to be faithful servants, *not* faithless tenants. Yes, there is nothing more God could do for us than show us the way to life and salvation in his son Jesus Christ. So, we - all of us - must be sure we do not exchange this for a cheap imitation. We must be sure that the opportunity God has given us to know, love and adore him is not rejected. Let us be sure we do not trade the wine of new life with sour grapes. Yes, there are many agents seeking to dismantle the faith. But let us not be numbered among them. What more could our Lord do for us? Listen to his word, and grow close to him, and we will find the life we desire. Amen.