

Sermon on 8 October 2017 Trinity 17 Isaiah 5.1-7, Matthew 21.33-46
By Reverend Colin James at All Saints Parish Church Wokingham

Every time we write or say something we assume other people will understand the words we're using. Most of the time that's probably true. But not always. That's because words carry associations which we may or may not all share.

For example, if we at All Saints talk about the Cornerstone, we have an instant mental picture of the parish building which has served us so well over the past thirteen years. But of course most people hearing the word wouldn't think of that at all.

When Jesus talks of the cornerstone he wants to be sure his hearers get the point. "Have you never read the scriptures?" he asks. He knows they have because he's talking about one of the psalms. (118.22) But he also knows they've not understood what it means. "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone".

Peter picks this up, speaking to the rulers of the people after the resurrection. There he spells it out very clearly, "Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you the builders; it has become the cornerstone." (Acts 4.11) It appears again in the first Letter of Peter which goes on, "A stone which makes them stumble...because they disobey the word, as they were destined to."(2.8) Jesus has come, and his coming brings blessing to those who receive him "It is amazing in our eyes."(42b) But it's also the undoing of those who reject him. "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces."(44)

The image of the cornerstone isn't the only one in today's gospel whose meaning may not be obvious, at least to modern readers. But it certainly would've been clear when Jesus used it. I'm talking of the vineyard. As we heard in Isaiah, "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but he saw bloodshed."(7)

Jesus' parable of the unscrupulous, and in the end murderous, tenants could stand by itself and still convey a powerful message. But it has a context. It taps into the cherished prophecy that God has a special care for his chosen people. He'll go to any lengths to make them prosper. He even erects a watchtower to protect them from those who wish them harm. But in spite of all this the most basic and destructive fault in human nature is still too strong. They want to grab for themselves what properly belongs to God alone. And we still do.

So not only do the tenants seize the produce of the vineyard entrusted to them. When God sends them prophets to call them back to loyalty and obedience they won't listen to their warnings. They beat them up and send them packing. Or worse still kill them. We mustn't get too hung up on each precise detail as the story develops.

Realistically a landowner would hardly sit back and let his slaves be beaten and killed without straight away taking punitive action. And he'd hardly expect such crooks to respect his son. But parables aren't to be understood point by point in a literal way. They're to confront us with a challenge.

And here it's that there's no limit to which God's love won't go to win us back from our self-centred and destructive nature, and its consequences. By our reasoning his behaviour seems reckless and foolish. It's meant to! We wouldn't be caught doing such a thing! Paul grasps this extraordinary truth when he writes, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor 1.25)

That's because God, who creates us, has a deeper and better understanding of our human nature than we have ourselves. If it were up to us, we'd surely act very differently from the way the landowner does in the parable. But that's the way God chooses to act in the events of Jesus' life. And, as those events start to play out, we'd say that he's made a terrible mistake.

But God knows what he's doing. And Jesus, even if he may have his doubts at the time, doesn't falter in his trust that his Father has got it right. Or has he?

Certainly the prediction that when God sends his Son he'll be respected turns out to be wrong. But, viewed from our side of the resurrection, we know that this defeat is not God's last word. Ultimately it's a victory. However, the parable's not quite over yet. There remains the revenge of the landowner on the perpetrators of the crime against his son. If we accept it at its face value, we're expect God's equivalent pitiless punishment on those who've brought about Jesus' judgment and death. That's all of us, who are sinners!

This brings us to the most amazing part of the Christian story. As John says in the prologue to his gospel, "He (Jesus) came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (1.11) Some admittedly did receive him and were given power to become children of God. (12) But they're only a tiny minority of all the people God has brought into being over the ages.

There are those who seem content with the notion that the vast majority of all humanity, which we describe in one of our eucharistic prayers as "the crown of all creation", should in the end be beyond the reach of God's power to forgive and restore. But when we remind ourselves that his power is the power of love, this just can't be so.

A few weeks ago we sang a hymn which includes the words, "we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own....for the love of God is broader than the scope of human mind, and the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind." (Wm Faber HON 501)

Is that just wishful thinking? Surely, like the landowner, God will want to repay us, the sinful human race, for the rejection of his only Son, sent when all else had failed to call us back to himself? We'd think so, but we'd be wrong.

The whole Christian hope rests on the very opposite. Luke tells us that even in the agony of the cross Jesus prays to his Father to forgive his enemies. (23.34) Are we to believe that God rejects his prayer? Paul clearly didn't, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5.19) We're not just to accept the good news that God doesn't exact vengeance on those who oppose him. We're to be the messengers of that good news, sharing it with others.

I know that leaves us with the problem of the vengeful words attributed to Jesus in today's gospel. But they can't be reconciled with Jesus' command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. (Mt 4.44) If both can't be true, there's surely no doubt about which we must embrace. The Good News is news of limitless love and forgiveness. The hymn I quoted just now ends like this, "If our love were but more simple, we should take (God) at his word; and our hearts would find assurance in the promise of the Lord."

Colin James