

Palm Sunday (evening) 2019 (14.04.19)

Isaiah 5: 1 – 7; Luke 20: 9 – 19

The parable of the leased-out vineyard, that we've just heard read for our Gospel reading, has just about always been interpreted as an allegory of salvation history. It's quite a theme running through the Old Testament to use the image of a vineyard owner and his vineyard to represent the relationship between God and the people of Israel. Isaiah 5, which we heard read as our first lesson this evening, is just one example. But hearing that read triggers our thinking that that is how this parable is to be heard.

God is the vineyard owner. The people of Israel are the tenants in the land he has provided for them. The three servants the owner sends to claim his share of the produce are the prophets – or perhaps, according to some ancient interpretations, the law, the psalms and the prophets; but in any event represent God's interaction with Israel up to the point of Jesus. And,

of course, the beloved Son is Jesus. In Luke's Gospel Jesus has been referred to as "My beloved Son" twice by the voice of God coming from heaven: once at his baptism and once during the story of the Transfiguration. So there can be no doubt that when people hearing Luke's Gospel hear the term "Beloved Son" the idea is that we understand it to mean Jesus.

In the context of the unfolding narrative of the Gospel, this parable serves to foreshadow and to explain the events that are about to unfold. It reveals that Jesus is going to be killed; and it explains why God's rescue mission for humanity has to go to such lengths. There is no doubt that the audience of the parable, within the narrative of the Gospel, understood it precisely to mean that. The scribes and the chief priests found that the cap fitted. They realised the story was told against them and they got shirty about it.

The parable, though, has three audiences. It has the people within the story who heard it: the scribes and

the chief priests. It then has the community of people who first heard the Gospel when it had been written some time towards the end of the first century. And then it has us, who hear it today. And we read it on Palm Sunday, the Sunday at the outset of Holy Week. So for us, it doesn't just remind us of what is going to happen next, it helps prepare us for it as well. It arrests us and stops us from hurtling into Holy Week. It pulls us up short and fills us with devotional awe and wonder: God so loves the world that he gave his Beloved Son for us. If we can capture that awe; if we can capture that sense of wonder at the extent and the depth of God's love; it will sustain us through Holy Week and heighten the vividness and the poignancy of the events we are going to hear unfurl.

But the parable doesn't just do that. It reminds us of God's judgement as well. As well as foreshadowing Jesus' death, it also foreshadows the Second Coming. It switches metaphor and describes Jesus as a stone that will break anyone who falls on it and will crush

anyone on whom it falls. It reminds us that we live in the in-between times: the times in-between the death of the Beloved Son and his coming again in judgment.

This is a bit of theology we try to overlook. We try to overlook it because we have a crude and primitive picture of God's judgment. We think that God's judgment is meted out by an angry old man in the sky who beats us with a big stick for all the stuff we've done wrong. As our discipleship becomes more mature and sophisticated we want to get rid of that primitive, anxiety-driven image of God. The danger is, though, that as we become liberated from that spiritually crippling image of God, we tend to get rid of the principle of judgment itself rather than developing a more mature and sophisticated model of it that keeps pace with the way our faith is maturing.

We must not throw out the baby with the bath water. God's judgment is important. It is not something to be feared, in the modern sense of the word. It is not

punishment. It is a calling – a divine command, if you like – but a calling to align ourselves with Jesus. The image evening’s parable uses is that Jesus is the “stone that the builders rejected [which] has become the corner stone. That divine command is to make Jesus the cornerstone of our lives; to look to Jesus and to ensure that he is at the very centre of everything we do; and that everything we do is keyed into him and depends on him for its stability.

As we look to Jesus on Palm Sunday, what we see is someone who was expected to charge into Jerusalem on a great stallion at the head of an insurrection – perhaps an armed insurrection – against the forces of Roman military occupation and oppression and all who were complicit with it; but who instead ambled in on a donkey and seemed unprepared and unconcerned about the booby trap he was about to walk into. What we see when we look to Jesus is someone who eschews, who rejects, who subverts force and power and might. What we see is someone who offers us a

counter-intuitive model of humility and servanthood. God’s judgment calls us to model our lives, to cultivate our characteristics through his grace and to align our principles with that pattern of living: rejecting hatred and spreading peace.

The parable of the leased-out vineyard, the parable of the owner who sent his own beloved son to sort things out, arrests our attention, puts us in the right devotional frame of mind, and assists to hear the divine call to God’s judgment as we journey through Holy Week to Calvary and beyond.

Amen.