MATTHEW 20-21

Let's review who are the different players in the gospel drama, quickly building to its climax.

There are the religious leaders (Sadducees and Scribes (Priests) who run the temple in Jerusalem, and Pharisees who run the synagogues across the country and elsewhere). Even though they hate each other on the most part, they have come together to topple Jesus one way or another. At first it is an attempt to discredit and undermine him before the people. Now that he has a major following and people are calling him a great prophet, maybe even the messiah to come, they have to eliminate him for good. The religious leaders are also ultra-nationalists who believe violent opposition to Rome and fierce distrust of all gentiles is the path to keeping themselves pure and ready to receive God's blessing and support for revolutionary change. In the meantime they will collude with Rome and play politics - whatever it takes to win a victory. The ends justify the means. Obedience to the letter of the law is about satisfying God. Building up hostility toward Rome and Herod, and loyalty to the religious leadership of Israel, is about securing power. They will not be thwarted, even by Jesus.

There are the disciples. Even though they have followed Jesus from the beginning and sacrificed much to do this, they continue to misunderstand Jesus. They resist any thought that Jesus will suffer, be rejected and killed by the leadership and the people. Their vision is for Jesus to be hailed King by all, and for them to inherit top positions of privilege, power and wealth as the Messiah's viceroys.

There are the crowds. Some are beholden to Jesus because they have been forgiven (sinners who are reminded of it regularly) and healed (those with various illnesses and disabilities who know what it means to be treated with contempt and condemnation). Others have expectations like those of the disciples or the religious leaders. Jesus' vision of Israel becoming purified through a commitment to peace through love, repentant of their hatred and hostility, finding a way to reconciliation and justice as a nation, and mercy in relation to other peoples as the fulfillment of God's call to them…. Such a vision is very far removed from anything the vast majority of people are prepared to consider.

20: 1-16. The Labourers in the Vineyard

This parable makes no sense in and of itself. It is meant to raise questions and challenge listeners' basic ethical sensibilities. But if we think about the earliest labourers hired as representing the disciples on the one hand or religious leaders on the other, and the last ones hired as sinners, tax collectors, the lame and blind – the people nobody wants to include, welcome or hire - then we can appreciate the logic of the parable better. Jesus/God will be

acknowledged and followed by the least of these. Those who are privileged now (disciples by being with Jesus and religious leaders in terms of their status, power and privilege in Jewish society) will have a hard time with Jesus' vision or fate. The way of servanthood is much easier for those who have already been humbled by life and by society. The owner of the vineyard will not neglect them. Even in the last hour, he will give them a job and treat them just like the first. The irony is that those who are first will resent it and come into conflict with the owner, rendering themselves last in terms of their good relationship and understanding of the vision. Those who are lastly included will be that much more grateful and prepared to follow. And so, they will end up first even as they were hired last.

20: 17-28 – A clash of visions between Jesus and his disciples

Jesus tells the disciples as clearly as ever what will happen to him. Even though Peter and the others don't resist what he is telling them as directly as before, the request of the mother of James and John on their behalf, and the conflict between the disciples that ensues, clearly indicates what they are interested in. They want tangible rewards for following Jesus. They have bet on Jesus' worldly success as King, and they want to be paid their stipends as his constant supporters from the beginning. Sadly, they cannot understand that Jesus' kingdom and its glory have nothing to do with worldly glory. It is by giving his life and serving the least that Jesus will inherit his glory. Those who would follow him must be prepared to do the same. It will not surprise us, then, that at the critical hour, the male disciples will disappear from Jesus' side.

20: 29-34 – Two Blind Men Healed

The parable of the vineyard and the conflict among the disciples are followed by an account of how Jesus' focus and that of the crowds are at odds, in so far as the crowd also reflects the worldly thinking of the disciples or the religious leaders. They have little patient for the nagging yells of two blind beggars. Jesus, however, sees these two as representative of the reason and purpose he has come. These beggars don't want money, privilege or status from Jesus. They don't care about whether Jew or gentile are in power over them. They want to be healed, and the Son of David can do it they believe. Jesus is moved with compassion. That is his motivating force. He heals them, they are able to see, and they follow him.

21: 1-10. Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

Jesus comes into the city hailed as kingly prophet, prophetic king. His "kingship" is marked by humility, not pomp and circumstance. Those who have more glorious expectations will never accept or understand. Those who are hungry and thirsty for an alternative kind of rule will welcome him. Children become representative of those who will welcome and receive the humble, suffering king.

21: 12-22 – Cleansing the Temple and Cursing the Tree

The temple and the fig tree are alike. Both have been condemned by Jesus. Both have not born good fruit. Both will wither and die. The problem with the temple is not the sacrifices, the money trading and buying of sacrificial livestock that are necessary for pilgrims to worship. The problem, rather, is that the leadership are inciting violent hatred against their enemies as the means to freedom (den of robbers or "brigands" refers to revolutionaries like Barabbas later in the story). The temple is not teaching God's will of holy, costly, revolutionary love. And so, it is an obstacle rather than a vehicle for God's true glory. It's destruction is inevitable and sadly justified.

"This mountain," that can be moved by faith, also refers to the temple and Jerusalem itself, built on it. The mountain won't last. It can and will be thrown into the sea (figuratively speaking). Only genuine faith can last and grow the transforming seed of love, even in the most hardened of ground.

21: 23-27 – Jesus' authority questioned

Jesus' authority to speak and act as he is doing is questioned publicly by the religious leaders in order to embarrass him if possible and discredit him among the crowd. But Jesus refuses to play their game. He turns the table on the religious leaders. Jesus knows that they have real issues with John the Baptist but will refuse to say so publicly because then they will be embarrassed and rejected by the people. John was deeply respected and revered. To criticize him is to lose popularity. To acknowledge him is to discredit themselves because they were opposed to John when he was alive. Better to get out of the way quickly and slither back under a rock till a more opportune time presents itself.

21: 28-32 – Parable of Two Sons

Like the parable about the owner of the vineyard, this one is also about the last becoming first and the first last. In this case it is about two sons. Like the disciples and the religious leaders in a different way, there is a claim to obedience and to follow the way of Jesus (disciples) or God (Religious leaders). But as Jesus has presented his vision, they have rejected it. Tax collectors and prostitutes (representing the quintessential sinners) by their lifestyle choices have refused obedience. But they are the ones most responsive to Jesus' vision and prepared for major change in their lives. Such change, however, does not make sufficient impression on the disciples and the religious leaders. They do not open themselves to re-envision what the messiah of God has come to achieve. The fact that people are healed/forgiven in mind, body and spirit as an expression of the revolutionary, transforming power of God's love to change the world beginning with Israel, has not taken root among them.

21: 33-46 – Parable of the Wicked Tenants

This parable is more straightforward than any that have come before. Jesus is becoming brazenly explicit. The message of condemnation is not missed by his critical audience of the religious establishment. Jesus is the cornerstone. He is the stumbling-block. For different reasons, neither the disciples, the religious leaders, nor the majority of the crowds, can receive him and his vision. The problem is that every choice has a consequence. To reject Jesus is to be against him. It is to be complicit in his fate. It is to incur God's condemnation. The religious leaders will actively engineer his execution. The disciples will be complicit by their scattering and abandonment. The crowds will also bear responsibility for their fickle opinions and shallow commitments that waver with the wind. If they don't think they need forgiveness now, they will definitely need it after the travesty of injustice and betrayal in Jesus' death has taken place.