THE WICKED TENANTS St Matt. 21:33-42

Today’s parable recounted by the Lord has a devastating impact on his audience. In the verses which follow we read, “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him but they feared the crowds because they regarded him as a prophet.” In another place, he heals a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath and corrects the Pharisees who criticise him for profaning the holy day by pointing out that they would lift a sheep out of a well on the Sabbath and it is right to do good on that day. Then we read that the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. There are no half measures in Christ’s words: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner,” and “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” So Christ speaks about himself as this stone and the only two possible reactions to him, namely acceptance or rejection.

The parable outlines the history of Israel and the God of Israel’s dealings with its people up to the arrival of Christ himself among its people. The Father together with the Son and the Holy Spirit create the world – the vineyard – in wisdom, which I suppose is indicated by the winepress, the fence and the watchtower. This is a well-planned vineyard designed to produce the best wine, the fruit of the vine. Then the landowner leases it out to tenants, mankind and especially Israel, and he leaves them to tame the earth so to speak and produce an outstanding vintage. When the harvest comes he expects his tithe or first tenth of the crop as God instructs Israel to do on leaving Egypt. But the tenants want it all and ignore God as Israel does often in its dealings with the God of Abraham and his descendants. He sends slaves who receive a beating or are stoned or killed and then a second group, larger than the first, which is treated similarly. These symbolise the leaders of Israel, Moses and the especially the prophets who in return for attempting to guide the people in the way of God’s law receive rejection and cruel treatment at their hands. Finally, the Father sends his only son, thinking that they will respect him, but the tenants, knowing that if they kill him they will receive the inheritance, do exactly that to Christ himself. The Father reacts by taking it away and giving it to those who produce the fruits of the vineyard or the Kingdom of Heaven.

The parable presents the history of Israel (and mankind too) very concisely and poignantly but can it be applied only retrospectively? Should we interpret it in the era of the Kingdom to ourselves in this church today? It becomes very enlightening and also very challenging if we do. The first question is what is the produce that is expected by the owner of the vineyard. As wine is the symbol of the Spirit and Jesus is the true vine, then we are expected to produce the Spirit or holiness in our own lives. The origins of the word ‘holy’ are to do with setting apart or being different. We are set apart from this world in such a way that we actually see into its secrets and enjoy it more for that. We are engaged on the struggle to transfigure both the world and ourselves. What is holiness and how is it achieved? We certainly don’t want to be like those who our late Metropolitan referred to as ‘atrociously pious’ and who came in false humility to confess every sin in the book only to be challenged by our late bishop with incredulity that a woman of 84 had committed adultery. As we learned last week from the sermon of the young man holiness starts with the keeping of the commandments 4 towards God and 6 towards our neighbour. This was described as the entry gate to the Kingdom since the law of love goes much further and is not in tabular form like the Mosaic law but is a response of our hearts to a situation. How often in the gospels do we read, “Jesus had pity on him…, Jesus had compassion on them…Jesus wept”. This is an outward response to a dire, helpless situation like those we see around us today, the homeless, the victims of war, the starving, various forms of illness. This often challenges us to put aside our prejudices against other religions, particular races, those of different sexual orientation and simply to offer our help unconditionally.

Another aspect is to work on ourselves and create within our hearts a place where God can live in increasing measure through our ascetic struggle. Last week we saw that the young man who wanted to go further could not because he was attached to his wealth. Freedom from obstacles to a deeper commitment to Christ’s call does not come easily and we may have to fight all our lives and repeatedly confess our weaknesses but we are urged by the Fathers and Mothers of the Church never to give up no matter how many times we give in. We are forgiven endlessly if our repentance is genuine.

In the Early Church we read that public confession was practised. It is mentioned by St James in his letter, “Confess your sins to one another”. How difficult that would be for us to reveal the disgraceful and scandalous aspects of ourselves and yet how closely it would draw us together through mutual compassion and prayer. It would also make us extremely sensitive to how our sins are directed not only against God, ourselves and the world but also against Christ’s body, the Church, and its stability, steadfastness, its efstatheia as we pray in the first litany. My son, who serves in the armed forces, told me recently how it is stressed that one of the greatest sins you can commit in the military is to fall asleep on watch since you endanger the lives of your colleagues by not sounding the alarm at the enemy’s approach. In a similar way, this applied to the early Christians especially in times of persecution. Apostasy, murder and adultery were publicly confessed and usually involved being debarred from communion for a lengthy period.

“In the fear of God, with faith and love draw near” are the challenging words of the priest before communion is given. The prayers which we should say at home but are often said in part by the reader in church remind us that we should not be burned by receiving communion in an unworthy state but that also we should not stay away since are sins when confessed are forgiven unto seventy times seven.

The verse which immediately follows today’s Gospel reading is as follows: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.” These words reflect not only Israel’s abandonment of its God but remind us of our vocation and struggle in Christ. There may be a marked disillusionment with the Church in many developed countries including our own but there are plenty of people in other parts of the world waiting eagerly to enter the kingdom as there were among the Gentiles in the Lord’s time during his earthly ministry. For us it is a salutary reminder of the call to holiness in humility through love. May God give us the vision, the confidence and the strength to see where and how we can accomplish this in a very needy and spiritually hungry world.

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