

Sunday 8 October 2023, Trinity 18, Choral Eucharist

Matthew 21:33-end

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When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.

What is a sermon for? I mean, why do Mthr Emma, and Mthr Alice, and I stand up here for ten minutes or so every week talking to you about prophets or parables? What is happening when you sit and listen? I recognise that there are two sides to this question: there's what we think we're doing and then there's what you think we're doing. I can't speak for you, but I believe I can speak relatively clearly for us, or at the very least for me.

What is a sermon and what is happening when it's preached? One way of answering these questions is to look at our gospel reading which I quoted just a moment ago: *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.* Jesus stood up and spoke to a crowd. He told them a story. But it wasn't just a story; it was a pointed message. We are at a disadvantage as 21st-century hearers because our cultural background hasn't equipped us to hear what Jesus was saying. Incidentally, that is part of what happens when a sermon is preached: we your clergy do our best to open up the context and cultural background to the bible readings so that we can all understand them better.

So what was it that Jesus hearers were understanding? *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower.* Without going into too much history, I can tell you confidently that any Jew who attended synagogue in Jesus' day would immediately have understood the vineyard, the wine-press, and the watchtower to be references to Israel. Likewise, the tenants are the tribes of Israel, the slaves are the prophets, and the landowner is God himself. From the very beginning, Jesus is saying, this is a story about how God relates to you his people. What happens next is calculated to disturb. This is sometimes what is going on in a sermon. We your clergy know from our own experience as Christians how easy it is to become complacent in living our faith. From time to time, asking difficult or disturbing questions is necessary to jolt us back into right ways of thinking and behaving.

So how does God relate to his people in Jesus' parable, or rather how do his people relate to him? *They seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way.* You know your history, says Jesus, you know how your ancestors treated the prophets; it's in the scriptures you read in synagogue each week. This is provocative. But Jesus isn't finished yet and he adds himself into the mix by way of talking about the Son, who his hearers would have understood to be the messiah. *When the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.* In this moment, Jesus reveals both that he is the messiah and that he knows exactly what's going to happen to him and who is going to do it.

Those who have been plotting against Jesus know he's talking about them too. Just imagine the squirming, the rising anger, the murmuring. And the rhetorical death blow comes when Jesus

tells them what will happen to them when they do this: *the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces.* When you kill me, the Gentiles will inherit the kingdom instead of you because they will hear my words. And you will be broken in pieces on me, the cornerstone of a new people, what we now know as the Church.

Is it any wonder the Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus when they heard this? Their response to his provocation was to stop their ears in anger and try to get rid of him. Now, let's not forget that we've been talking about what happens when a sermon is preached. When one of us from this pulpit asks an uncomfortable question or provokes an emotional response, do you want to have us taken away? Do you want to get rid of our uncomfortable words? You see, each of us here in this church is part of a living story that reflects the narrative of the gospel. A word is spoken: in today's case, a word of challenge. A response is elicited: in today's case a response of anger. A sermon is intended to speak a word of truth and to elicit a response from you. It is a moment for Mthr Emma or Mthr Alice or I to speak, but really it's a moment for Jesus to speak—for he does speak when we are faithful to what he would say—and it's a moment for you to hear him.

As sermon that is faithful to Jesus' words is itself a word from Him. And you are being prompted to respond. The question arising from today's gospel is this: will you respond like the Pharisees and put his words away from you because they make you uncomfortable? Or will you hear the truth of his words and act on them? For the Pharisees to have really heard him would have meant repentance and worship. They, alas, were too hard-hearted to listen. They have fallen on Jesus and are dashed in pieces; for whoever in our day has met a Pharisee? They are gone. Today we hear Jesus' words. We still have the chance to turn again and live. What will you do when Jesus speaks? Amen.