

At the Eucharist this morning, we heard and enacted the traditional readings for Palm Sunday, first remembering Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, as the crowds waving palm branches greeted him with shouts of "Hosanna!", and then the full, tragic story of Jesus' Passion and Death.

Our Matins reading this morning fits in between these two events, during the week in which Jesus walked freely in Jerusalem, teaching and exhorting, and returned each night to stay with Mary and Martha in Bethany, as the religious leaders in Jerusalem plotted with increasing desperation, to bring about his arrest, conviction and death.

This is the week we commemorate throughout this Holy Week which lies ahead of us, and we recall the many stories, images, parables and teachings of Jesus during his final days on earth.

At the start of the week, we hear how he "cleansed the Temple" of the money lenders, but only the next day, he returned to the Temple and was challenged by the religious leaders, who asked him by whose authority he did and said such dramatic things.

Our parable today is his response to this challenge, but it is also a foreshadowing of the events which lie ahead of him.

It is impossible to miss the echo in Jesus' parable, of the story told in the prophecy of Isaiah which we heard in our first reading.

The details of the vineyard, from the hedge to the watchtower, are closely followed, and for the religious leaders who had devoted their lives to the study of the Hebrew Scriptures, there would have been no question that Jesus' vineyard, just like Isaiah's, represented the promised land of Israel, with God as its owner.

The owner in Jesus' story puts the vineyard into the care of husbandmen – a very common (even if resented) practice in first-century Galilee, where much of the land was owned by absentee

landlords, who appointed tenants and then sent agents to collect the rent.

Perhaps as the story opens, the religious leaders proudly see themselves as those left to care for God's chosen land and people.

But then there comes the mention of the owner's "servant", sent to collect the rent.

"Servant" is a term used throughout the Old Testament to refer to God's prophets, and when we hear that a number of servants were attacked and mistreated, the story takes on a different tone.

Jesus' listeners would all have known of the narratives of the mistreatment of God's prophets throughout the Old Testament, and so the allegory makes sense to them, even if it seems to cast some aspersions on those who saw themselves as placed in charge.

But then there is a new twist.

The owner sends his only, wellbeloved, son, believing that the tenants will treat him with the respect and reverence he deserves, but he too is horrifically treated and killed by the tenants in the hope of stealing his inheritance.

It is then that the owner, now described as the "Lord of the vineyard", steps in to destroy those left in charge and to give his vineyard into the care of others.

For Christians, accustomed to the image of Christ as the only Son of God, this allegory is almost too clear.

It is the story of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as God's Son is attacked and put to death.

And the moral of the parable is that those who seek to destroy Jesus will ultimately succeed only in destroying themselves as the land in their care is given into the hands of others.

But the story does, of course, raise all kinds of new questions about the “new tenants”.

With hindsight, we know that only forty or so years later in response to the Jewish revolt, the Romans clamped down with violent force on the province, destroying the Temple and putting many to death, taking over the land fully for the Emperor.

Is this what Jesus was predicting as he foresaw the destruction of those who sought to convict and kill him?

The early Christians understood this story to predict the transfer of the care of Israel from the Jewish authorities to the followers of “The Way” – those who believed in the Resurrection of Jesus, saw him as the Son of God and sought to follow in his path.

Perhaps a little later, those converted by Paul might have seen the new tenants as the Gentiles who grew to dominate the Church as it spread across the world, expanding the allegory of the vineyard from the land of the Chosen People, to a global faith in Jesus Christ.

But how should we understand the new tenants in our world today?

It is clear that the wicked “husbandmen” are all those who fail to recognise God’s true authority in his world.

They do not hear or act on the words of his messengers and are concerned with their own self-interest, ignoring or condemning others who seek to revere and to follow God’s Son.

By contrast, perhaps the new husbandmen are those into whose care God’s world and God’s people have now been placed.

And there is a question here for us as we enter this week in which we remember the arrest, conviction, suffering and death of the Son of God by those amongst whom he dwelt and died in order to “draw all people to himself”.

Do we recognise Christ among us today, sent to draw to himself the first fruits of the Harvest from his father's vineyard?

Have we rather set ourselves up as self-sufficient husbandmen, exploiting God's gifts for our own needs, forgetting to care for Creation and for those made in God's image and refusing to give to God the harvest owed to him?

Do we fully remember and enact that well-known phrase from the first Book of Chronicles: "For all things come from Thee, and from Thine own have we given Thee"?

This week we are given the chance to walk with Christ on the Way of the Cross, to remember that God sent his own Son to draw in the rich harvest of his people.

As we remember his betrayal, as we kneel before his Cross, as we watch before the Tomb, we might ponder the thought that we who follow in his Way are called to be the tenants of God's vineyard, and as such, to give ourselves, our souls and bodies and all that we have, as the offerings of God's harvest.