



Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 8th October 2023

Trinity XVIII

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46; Philippians 3:4b-14

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen** Psalm 19:14

Three out of the four set lectionary texts for today concern **vines and vineyards**, hence these provide me with an obvious theme for today's sermon.

The passage in Isaiah is a judgmental love song, Psalm 80 is a petition or plea to God and the passage in Matthew's gospel is one of the prophetic parables of Jesus. Each of these literary devices: the love song, the petition and the parable, uses vines and vineyards as metaphors to reveal deeper meanings and truths.

Let me start by conducting a synoptic survey across the three passages.

In all three, reference is made, or inferred, to fertile ground that has been cleared and planted with choice vines. The vineyards are protected with hedging, walls or fencing, respectively. In both Isaiah and Matthew a watch tower is built. In Matthew a vine press is constructed, and in Isaiah a wine vat. The expectation therefore is of a successful and recurring harvest. However, in two of the three passages, destruction then follows. In Isaiah, wild grapes result and the vineyard is wilfully neglected and destroyed. In the Psalm, the vineyard walls are broken down and the fruits are plucked by passers by, and eaten and ravaged by animals. In the Psalm, God is clearly the owner of the vineyard. In Isaiah, God is implied to be the owner, being the prophet's beloved and being able to command no rains to rain upon it. The explanation of the metaphor in Isaiah is clear:

'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah is his pleasant planting.'

The explanation of the metaphor is also clear in the Psalm: in the exhortation by the people of Israel, from whom God has turned away:

'Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.'

It is a cry for restoration and salvation by and for the people of Israel.

Similarly at the end of the Isaiah passage:

'(God) expected justice, but saw bloodshed, righteousness but heard a cry!'

As the Irish biblical scholar J. Alec Motyer points out, according to Ezekiel 15:2-5 a vine is either good for fruit or good for nothing. Since the Lord's people are his vine, the same truth applies: they are either good, or good for nothing. Before the fall of Samaria in 722 BC the house of Israel meant either the whole divided nation or its northern component. Isaiah addresses the whole nation and then narrows down to the specially privileged house of Judah. Justice is the righting of wrongs, whereas bloodshed is the inflicting of wrongs. Righteousness is right living and right relationships while to cry indicates wrong relationships and the anguish of the oppressed. These are tensions that are typically widespread throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

Now we come to the New Testament vineyard reading, known as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. It is a parable of judgment. Do the opening sentences of this parable sound familiar?

‘There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence round it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.’

Remember that Isaiah says:

‘My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.’

Surely the gospel writer, and indeed Jesus himself, must have been aware of the Isaiah text when this was spoken?

Matthew then develops Jesus’s allegorical narrative in a characteristically New Testament direction. The landowner goes abroad, and leases the vineyard to tenants. What happens subsequently just goes to prove that, even in those days, buy to let was just not worth it!!

The landowner’s slaves, or servants, come to collect his produce: one is beaten, another is stoned and one is killed; common acts of violence in the first century. Another attempt at extracting the tribute with even more servants ends in a similar way. Finally he sends his son, thinking that they will respect him. No, that too ends badly, he is thrown out of the vineyard and killed.

Jesus’s explanation of the outcome of the parable comes in verse 43:

‘the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.’

Let us examine who the ‘you’ is in the context of Jesus’s life.

Biblical scholars such as Kilmarnock-born Matthew Black interpret the owner of the vineyard as God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the leaders of the nation, the servants are the prophets and the son is Jesus himself.

It is certain that Jesus was confronted by opposition from the leaders of his people, and in speaking of this situation, is it not possible that he had Isaiah 5 in mind? He was alluding to his own death on the cross and thus Matthew’s sequence of events provides an exact outline of the history of redemption in allegorical form.

The American theologian Douglas Hare sees this parable as the centrepiece of Jesus’s threefold response to the religious leaders, who question his authority; the other parables being those of the two sons and of the king’s wedding feast. He suggests that the ‘you’ Jesus addresses is not just his opponents but all who follow their leadership in rejecting the prophets John the Baptist and Jesus. Hare states that Christians must take great care in the interpretation of this ‘parable of the passion’, with its emphasis on the murder of God’s son by Israel’s leaders. Attention should be focussed on what it implies about Christians. The ‘others’ to whom the vineyard is given over are also accountable to the owner. They too are charged with the heavy responsibility of producing the fruits of the kingdom. The punishment of others is cause not for rejoicing but for fear.

And finally, in the epistle reading, Paul’s rejection of his former self-confidence and zeal, his invective against his own Judaic upbringing, now replaced by his devotion to Christ:

‘forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

May it now be so for all of us. Amen

A postscript.

What about the vineyard that is Downing Place? This is, after all, a Group service led by the Worship, Discipleship and Spirituality Group! At Downing Place our Group has oversight of public worship as our main rôle.

Sunday by Sunday our main service is led by our minister Nigel or by individuals or Groups arranged through our pulpit supply secretary, formerly Pippa and now Augur. We are grateful to the many in-house and visiting preachers on the list, taking the service normally about once a month when Nigel is preaching at Fulbourn, our sister congregation. Within our group membership we have a representative of Junior Church, formerly Daphne and now Elza, and our music co-directors, Mark and Ian, whose work enhances our worship, week by week. Midweek worship takes place on the premises every Thursday, including two services of holy communion monthly. Open Table, organised by Alison and her team, meets twice a month on Sunday evenings, once for communion. Our termly house groups, coordinated by Penny, offer study of a particular topic both in person at home and on-line. Deborah's Lectio Divina series offer prayer and meditation on-line on Friday mornings. Pippa is recommencing a monthly prayer group, meeting prior to one of the monthly communion midweek services. Our group also promotes local ecumenical engagement and local inter-faith relations.

May God bless our endeavours here in this place.

Alan Rickard