

Sunday 4th October 2020 – Bulwell United Reformed Church

The service this week moves on to Matthew 21: 33-46. Jesus tells a story about Israel and God using the familiar image of a vineyard. But Jesus' version leaves his listeners feeling uncomfortable. With their certainties challenged, the religious authorities are fearful for themselves. For us today, the parable addresses the limitations of certainty; being open to possibilities; the impact of relationships. *A short service for personal communion focusing on confessing Jesus is Lord is included. Please have your bread & wine/juice ready.*

A gathering prayer

Let us come and wait for our Saviour. Let us come and wait for his transforming power. Let us come and experience his abiding love. Let us come and worship him.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

God of the journey of life, the mystery of our very being,
we confess that the journey we take gets disrupted and we get side-tracked.
We go off on wild goose chases that lead us nowhere, up blind alleys and into bad and barren places.

We find our way back to you in sorrow for our failings and in penitence for our wanderings.

***May we be enriched by your welcome, relieved by your forgiveness
and comforted by your all-embracing love. Amen.***

Our Father

Song In Christ alone (Official Lyric Video) - Keith & Kristyn Getty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16KYvflc2bE>



Matthew 21: 33-46 - The parable of the tenants

³³ 'Listen to another parable: there was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

³⁵ 'The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Last of all, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

³⁸ 'But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

⁴⁰ 'Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'

⁴¹ 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' they replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes”?

⁴³ ‘Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.’

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (NIVUK)

The Parable of the Vineyard – A Changed Community

The classic understanding of this parable is that Jesus is telling the leaders of Israel that they have failed in their recognition of firstly the prophets and now the Messiah. They have responded to the challenges that these people of God have brought to them, not by changing their ways, but with violence and murder. And Matthew, in particular, stresses that now God’s vineyard will pass to another people – that is to the Gentiles who follow Jesus. And we, as those who have responded to Jesus, can rejoice in our new inheritance.

Well that’s certainly part of the story, but we can’t afford to be too smug in our identification with the good guys. The challenge for us is in verse 44, ‘Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.’ We need to produce fruit and if necessary be prepared to change.

In this and the preceding parables we have been looking at over the past few weeks, Jesus puts the emphasis on how we behave. Jesus models Godly living – humility, justice, care for the sick and the little ones, and then questions how we live and behave. Do we just talk the talk, or walk the walk? How do we behave when the crunch comes – Christ-like? We have to bear good grapes – the fruits of the kingdom, and give God the rightful share of our lives, and that can be costly.

Jesus does not criticize the Jewish leaders for their lack of religious devotion, or for their worship, but he does constantly ask questions about how their faith affects their behaviour; their priorities and their openness to change and new possibilities. In this passage, he points them to the verse in Psalm 118 – about how people so often reject something as worthless that turns out to be the cornerstone of a new future.

And I think that that is the question for us. It’s easy to nod sagely when we hear that the people of Israel were unable to respond to the prophets God sent to them, but do we keep failing to recognize the messengers of God who come to us today?

When new possibilities of change are opened to us, do we simply beat them up because we’re scared? When love is offered, do we respond with fear and mistrust? When there is a challenge to a different way of living, do we respond violently for fear of failing again?

Our reflexes are often trained to reject, rather than to embrace. Our reflexes are often to criticize rather than encourage, to justify rather than to repent, to judge rather than to

accept, and we need to work on them and re-train them if we are to bear the fruits of the Kingdom.

The great Reformation text is that we are saved through faith, but it seems in this parable that Jesus is more concerned with how we behave than with what we believe. – as James put it, ‘faith without works is dead.’ Our faith is birthed as we deliberately create a welcome space for the love of God to motivate and transform our behaviour. The call is to stop defending ourselves, and fighting off the intruders in the vineyard, and rather to welcome the spirit-sent opportunities that will demand of us, but will also change us.

And we can’t do it alone – we need to help one another; speak truth to one another, and receive truth from one another, but we can’t do that without loving one another, and that’s what’s really difficult. As a community of believers here I doubt there are many among us who have not been have been damaged by life in some way, we can have brittle edges and low tolerances of others. God will not heal us in isolation, nor change us by some kind of osmosis. Only through repeated acts of will by each of us, which arise from our prayer and our encounters with God, can we move beyond being a group who simply worship together to becoming a community which displays the fruit of the Kingdom.

Prayers of intercession

Father, Lord of creation, we pray for all who have the power to shape or mar this planet. May they act responsibly and wisely to sustain life.

Jesus, Lord of the Church, our Redeemer and Judge, may we confront injustice, speak up against the exploitation of the weak, and accept the cost of discipleship.

Holy Spirit, Challenger and Changer, melt the hearts of the spiritually complacent, awaken the minds that need to change so that faith may be renewed, lifestyles reshaped, in tune with the world and its Creator.

Trinity of Unity, restore our broken world, and the fractured relationships that we recall before you now

Time for silent prayer...

Gracious God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
grant that we and those for whom we have prayed
may be whole and complete in you.

Amen.

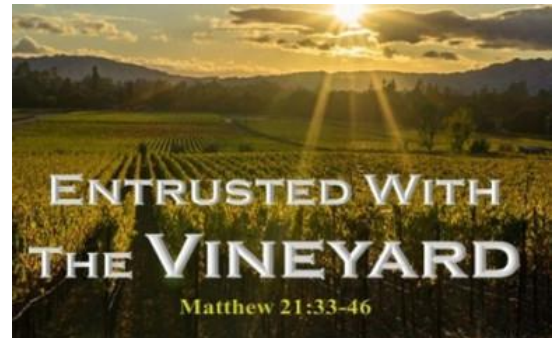
Song Take my life and let it be (Hymn Charts with Lyrics, Contemporary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9speOjVQ3ZA>

HOLY COMMUNION Prayer of Thanksgiving – Matthew 21: 33-46

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,
for you have made us your own, through Christ Jesus,
and given us a new righteousness based on faith.

Though we repeatedly rejected your ways
and destroyed your messengers,
you sent your Son to us to renew heaven's call.
Though the crowds recognised him as a prophet,
those who coveted his inheritance seized and killed him.
But you raised him from the dead,
and now through the power of his resurrection
he stands as the cornerstone of righteousness,
the first fruits of the kingdom,
and the incomparable prize towards which we press.



***Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.***

The Breaking of the Bread and Pouring of the Wine

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.
I Corinthians 5:7

The Sharing of the Bread and the Wine

*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.
Blessed are those who are called to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Alleluia.*

Take, eat; this is the body of Christ, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of him.

This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ, shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sin. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of him.

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we praise you for what you have given and for what you have promised us here. You have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth. You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.

Now we give ourselves to you; and we ask that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love reaching out into the life of the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

A sending out prayer

May we live in faith, act in righteousness, always be loved
and make Jesus, the Christ, the cornerstone of our lives. **Amen**

