

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80 [79]; Philippians 4:6-9; Matthew 21:33-43

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone

[Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people:]

Mt 21:33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’

43 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.

44 *The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.*”

45 *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This uncomfortable parable is also found in Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19. The context is important—in the narrative of the Gospel, this parable is offered within the temple in Jerusalem and the closing verses (omitted by the editors of the lectionary) let us know exactly what we are dealing with. Once more in Matthew, the break with the mother religion is at stake:

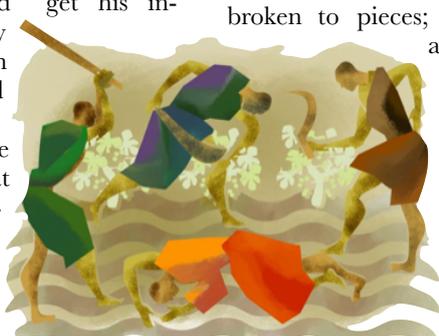
“The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them.” (Mt 21:44-45)

It is instructive to read this parable against the version found in Mark. The reader will notice that in Matthew’s hands the parable has become more allegorised, historicised and moralised (!).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Today’s first reading from Isaiah 5 and the psalm provide ample Old Testament background to the reading. There are other allusions which will be noticed in the commentary.

(ii) The use of Psalm 118:22—no doubt not part of the original parable—reflects an attraction to this verse across the



Thought for the day

The risk for Christians today is that we read the parable complacently, because it clearly refers to Jews and Christians in the first century. But it is not only in the past that the leadership of God’s project has changed hands, so to speak. Down through history, more committed groups have challenged the established Church—they can attract by more exciting worship and by a closer living of the Gospel. The hard words of St Paul to the Gentile Christians in Rome may help to shake us up: *For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.* (Rom 11:21)

Prayer

Lord of the vineyard, you call us to live the Gospel and to produce its fruits. Send your Spirit into our hearts, that we know the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22–23),

New Testament. It was used to reflect on the cross and the break with the mother religion. It is found attached to the parable at this point, but also in Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7.

KIND OF WRITING

This is, of course, a parable. However, this particular parable is very close to an allegory, in the sense that the figures in the narrative fairly clearly refer to stages in Israelite history and to the suffering and death of Jesus. Following the allegories of the Old Testament, the owner is God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenants are the Jewish leaders; the servants are the prophets; the son is Jesus; the new tenants are the early church (but see below the warning from Romans 11!). A detail such as “outside” could easily refer to the execution of Jesus *outside* the holy city; the wretched end might refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) The imagery of wine, vine and vine-

yard recurs in the Synoptic tradition: Matt 9:17; 20:1-2, 4, 7-8; 21:28, 33, 39-41; 26:29; 27:34, 48 (looking only at Matthew). The force of the language can be noticed in these two citations:

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” (Matt 9:17)

“I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Matt 26:29)

(ii) The imagery of the vine is resumed magnificently in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is presented as the true vine (15:1-6).

ST PAUL

There is a remarkable passage in Romans, which uses again an image taken from farming—this time the olive—to speak of the tragic break with the parent religion:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.” (Rom 11:17-24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 33 Another parable—this is the third of three vineyard parables in succession. In Matthew’s version the owner is called a householder—a term used in Matthew (7+1+4) to refer to God in the parables (cf. Matt 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; 24:43). The absentee

landowner may reflect actual conditions in Galilee during the ministry of Jesus. The echo of Isaiah 5 is unmissable.

Verse 34 The harvest is the time of judgement; the “slaves” are the prophets sent regularly to the people of Israel. Notice that in Matthew they are sent to collect *his* produce. Already, the parable is beginning to sound like an allegory.

Verse 35 The stoning of a prophet occurs in 2 Chronicles 24:21. The persecution of prophets is very clear in Jeremiah, Matthew’s favourite prophet.

Verse 36 The second set of slaves might be a reference in Matthew’s rabbinic mind to the former and the latter prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

Verse 37 In the social context of the time, the tenants should be more respectful towards the higher authority. After the previous experience, it seems naïve of householder (God) to send his son (Jesus), but this is the naivety of love, continuing to trust and to hope. The use of “finally” (7+1+1) is evidence that Matthew sees a new stage of salvation history opening the Jesus’ death.

Verse 38 The sequence of thoughts is quickly told without embellishment.

Verse 39 The sequence in Mark is altered (they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard) so that the Son is killed outside the vineyard, effecting a clearer reference to Golgotha.

Verse 40 Again, Mark is transformed and supplemented: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.” (Mark 12:9)

Verse 41 The transition to the Christian dispensation is anything but complacent—the fruit is still expected.

Verse 42 A reference to Jesus as the cornerstone. As noted, this image of stone / cornerstone is found across the New Testament.

Verse 43 A tough and forthright clarification, unique to Matthew. Lest it lead to smugness, it is best read in the light of Romans 11 above!! There the parable ends for the liturgy, but in the NT there are the two further verses noticed above.

Verse 44 This difficult verse is found in some important manuscripts and these days often included in the text. Previously, it had been assessed as a scribal gloss taken from Lk 20:18. It is a threatening text, taking up the imagery of the stone

from Psalm 118:22 and foreseeing terrible consequences for those who reject the messaged sent by God. No doubt, it reflects the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Verses 45-46 These concluding verses indicate that the parable had “hit home” that the hearers felt its full impact.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The target audience of this allegorical parable are the Jewish chief priests and elders portrayed here as rejecting Jesus and his teaching, and as a consequence losing out on what God was offering them. It is a story of opportunity for life presented and rejected, and they lose out in the process. How important have you found it to recognize and accept opportunities for growth, development and new life when these were presented to you?

2. The parable is also a cautionary tale about the destructive effects of greed – doing violence to the rights of others and eventually destroying the greedy themselves. What attitude towards possessions has helped you to be at peace in yourself and at peace with others?

3. The vineyard of the Lord is an image for God’s people. As we look at the vineyard we have been given we can ask ourselves “are we good tenants?” Recall times when you have been a good tenant, and reached out caringly for those around you.

4. The landowner in the story is angered at the behaviour of the tenants. In his anger he takes steps to pass the care of his vineyard on to others. When have you allowed your anger at injustice, or at the abuse of people to move you to take steps to redress the injustice? When have you used the energy of your anger to motivate you to take a positive step?

PRAYER

Yours, O God, is the vineyard and its harvest, yours the kingdom of justice and peace. You call your people to tend its growth.

Bless the work entrusted to our hands, that we may offer you an abundance of just works, a rich harvest of peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The song of the vineyard

- Isa 5:1 Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
- 2 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;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
- Isa 5:3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
- 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
- Isa 5:5 And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
- 6 I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
- Isa 5:7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The vine is a wonderful plant and essential in the Mediterranean. It lives long, often with gnarled branches; its leaves are generous and fresh; its fruit can be eaten and made into wine. It also calls for great care in planting, pruning and harvesting.

The reading—one of the most famous in Isaiah—is chosen today to reflect the vineyard imagery in the Gospel. With today's psalm, it establishes a metaphor taken from farming, but goes on to use it to explore the loving offer of God and the rejection of that planting and care. There follows a judgment scene.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

All of Isaiah 5 should be read. It consists of two parts as follows:

- 1-7: our reading, the vineyard song;
- 8-24: seven "woe" speeches.
- 25-30: judgment is announced.



Many commentators regard the following section—6:1-9:7—as an interpolation and consider that our reading continues in 9:8-10:4. These verses do indeed seem to complete what was begun in chapter 5 and bring it to a conclusion.

KIND OF WRITING

Isaiah 5:1-7 is a poem, with the usual biblical style. Nevertheless, it is a puzzling poem. We may ask, who is speaking—the poet / prophet or God? The hint is in the expression "my beloved." The poet is speaking a love song on behalf of his beloved, his "friend", that is

the bridegroom. Cf. Song 1:6, 14; 2:15; 8:12. However, from v. 3 onwards, it is the owner who speaks. In v. 7 the poet resumes and refers to the owner in the third person. In this way, a love song becomes a kind of judicial case, with forensic imagery. Taking it as a whole, it really resembles a judicial parable along the lines of 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

It shows the following pattern:

- 1a: Introduction and address
- 1b-2: The vineyard is described
- 3-6: The disappointment of the owner
- 7: An indictment of Israel and Judah

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song 1:6)

My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi. (Song 1:14)

Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyards—for our vineyards are in blossom." (Song 2:15)

My vineyard, my very own, is for myself; you, O Solomon, may have the thousand, and the keepers of the fruit two hundred! (Song 8:12)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 80 (79) is a heartfelt prayer, again reflection the creation of a vineyard and the witness to its destruction. The response keeps the listeners on track: *The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.*

THE GOSPEL LINK

The link with the Gospel is clear—although not many may know that in the Biblical tradition, the vineyard was not just a commercial project but a metaphor for love.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1a The hearer's attention is sought. The prophet speaks as the friend of the bridegroom.

Verse 1b-2 Planning and tremendous investment went into the creation of the vineyard. 2c anticipates judgment.

Verse 3-4 Powerful rhetorical questions lend great force to this address. The judgement is fairly non-specific, except insofar as it touches on justice.

Verse 5-6 All the carefully setting up of

undone and reversed.

Verse 7 The key to the allegory is given.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. One of the great insights of Israelite religion at its best was the inseparability of worship and justice. Seeking justice and acting justly lie at the heart of the faith project. Where do I stand? What is my practice? How do I promote justice? Remember, justice is always concrete and real and never abstract and merely ideal.

2. The loving imagery of tending is very appealing. If I were to create an image for my own faith in God's love, what contemporary image would come to mind?

3. The "song" makes us reflect on our own live and values.

PRAYER

Loving God, we are of your planting and you care for us. May we draw life from Jesus, the true vine, and in communion with him, bear fruit in justice and love. Through Christ our Lord.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 5:1-7

If you have ever seen a vineyard, you know just how beautiful a plant the vine is. Our reading today—the song of vineyard—using the metaphor of the vine to speak of God's love and, crucially, of God's expectations of us all.

Second reading

Philippians 4:6-9

How should we live? What should we hope for? With the wisdom and tranquility of experience, Paul, by now an old man, offers us a pen picture of discipleship.

Gospel

Matthew 21:33-43

Like many parables, the story of the vineyard is meant to be disturbing and uncomfortable. At its core, it speaks to faithful people whose very fidelity makes the unable to see the new things God is doing. The message is for every time!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

The letter to the Galatians

We read from the letter to the Galatians from today until Wednesday of the fol-

lowing week. Galatians is a great Christian document which has influenced Christian thinking for two millennia. It is short but complex. Furthermore, finding a good translation is a must for certain passage. The key issue (if you don't mind a bit of technical comment) is the transition of an expression in Greek. *Pistis christou* can be rendered in two ways which are very distinct: faith in Christ or faithfulness of Christ.

In general, the NET Bible gets it right, in my opinion. It is available for free at: <https://bible.org/netbible/> for the full version plus excellent notes. You can also buy a printed edition, of course.

The context of the letter is straightforward enough. Paul had preached in Galatia where he was delayed through illness. After his departure, "apostles" arrived saying that Paul has simplified things for Gentile by not insisting on the full observance of the Jewish Law, in particular, the identity markers of circumcision, dietary laws and Sabbath observance. The new arrivals insisted that in Jerusalem all these things were observed and should be. A messenger was sent to Paul (at Ephesus?) to report and get his opinion. The letter is his furious response.

It would be a really good idea to read through the whole letter ahead of time to be able to comment well on the excerpts chosen for the liturgy.

Monday 6 October St Bruno

Galatians 1:6-12

For the next week and a bit, we hear from the letter to the Galatians. Briefly, Paul had preached to the people of Galatia (in modern Turkey) and told them they need not follow the Jewish Law in all its details. After Paul left, preachers arrived who said they should keep all the law, including circumcision. Paul writes back—in this reading we can see how upset he was, even furious!

Tuesday 7 Oct Our Lady of the Rosary

Galatians 1:13-24

Today we get to hear Paul's own version of his conversion. The encounter with Christ was foundational for him and his being an apostle was a calling from the risen Lord himself, not some human authority. No one "authorised" him, so he is really independent.

Wednesday 8 October

Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14

It may not strike us that eating with the uncircumcised would be a big issue. It

was, however. Keeping such rules was seen a key to Jewish identity. Paul has a "go" at Peter, who has acted in a very two-faced, even cowardly way. Paul writes with clarity (if not with charity!).

Thursday 9 October St Denis

Galatians 3:1-5

This is a short but significant passage. The new preachers claimed to have enhanced the faith of the Galatians. Paul asks a penetrating question: did you receive the Spirit *before* these people came or *after*? The answer is clear. Just as Paul had his encounter with Christ long before meeting Peter and the others, likewise, the Galatians knew the Spirit before the arrival of those wishing to impose the Law.



Friday 10 October

Galatians 3:7-14

Our reading today is one of the most dense and difficult in St Paul's writings. We bear two things in mind. (1) According to Paul, the promise to Abraham included the *future* salvation of everyone including Gentiles. (2) "Curse" here means to be outside the blessing of the covenant. Paul is saying that on the cross Jesus, whose ministry was to the excluded and marginalised, himself became one of them by experiencing the cross. By identifying with the outsiders, so to speak, Jesus brought them God's salvation and so the promise to Abraham was fulfilled. All are saved in Jesus and come to know the love of God.

Saturday 21 October St Canice

Galatians 3:22-29

Eventually, Paul has to ask a hard question. If some major features of the Law are set aside in Christ and no longer apply to Christians, what *was* the point of the Law at all? He explains by using an image from everyday experience. In those days, children going to school were accompanied by a slave—called in our translation a guardian—who minded the children until they grew up. Once grown up, the minder is no longer needed.