

REJECTION AND RENEWAL:

THE WICKED TENANTS

Matthew 21.33-46

Introduction

Rejection is a horrid word. It conjures up pain, embarrassment, loneliness and fear. If we have had an experience of rejection we do not want to experience it again.

This is a parable that makes us sit up and take notice immediately. We do not usually associate Jesus with what looks like rejection of others. We tend to see Jesus as welcoming and open. And yet something seems to be going on here that makes the reader uneasy.

The background

Jesus is in Jerusalem on the last week of his life. He has ridden in triumph, cleansed the Temple, confronted angry leaders who demanded his credentials and now he tells three parables that get to the heart of his differences with the leadership. Today we look at the first of these.

The allegory

This mixture of parable and allegory is an interpretation of Israel's leaders' spiritual history. The picture of the vineyard comes from Isaiah 5.1-7. "Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard..." Israel, the covenant people, is God's vineyard and this is God's love song to them.

Jesus' parable is an extension of God's great love-song for Israel. The trouble in the turbulent history of this great love is that the lover's

love for the vineyard is unrequited. How can the lover capture his beloved's attention again?

This is the story of much of the OT and now becomes Jesus' story and challenge.

His telling of the story is full of depth, sorrow and power as was Isaiah. In the line of the rejected prophets like Isaiah it tells how Jesus has now come to Jerusalem to confront the tenant farmers with God's demand for repentance: that they should let go their own agendas this-worldly empire of survival, power, violence, deceit, hypocrisy, xenophobia and the accumulation of wealth. He comes to tell them that God wants them to take up the kingdom agenda of a new people of love peace, joy, justice, faithfulness and truthfulness and be a light set on a hill to the nations, to be the salt of the earth.

But the leadership in Israel has a history of not being able to hear God speaking.

So Jesus puts the question about what they the leaders think that the owner of the vineyard should do. Their answer is their own judgment. The tenants will be replaced.

But Jesus does not stop there. He uses two scripture references, well known to his audience. One is Ps. 118, the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone. It is the stone of honour and it holds the whole building together so that anything that crashes against it to bring it down will be destroyed, crushed.

The other stone is from Daniel 2. This is the stone that would come from nowhere and destroy the last great kingdom, the kingdom of iron that crushes everything in its way, the kingdom that uses power and violence at will, but has clay feet. The stone destroys it.

Jesus' hearers thought that represented the clash of Rome and the Messiah who was the Stone, the disabler of Rome and destroyer of its unbridled power.

But Jesus seems to have a different view. It seems that he thought that the alliance of Jewish leadership and Herodian politics, a constant theme in the Gospels, is instead in God's sights. He takes aim at the pragmatic and utilitarian combination of religion and politics to pursue power, violence and gain. Maybe it is their shaky kingdom that will come crashing down when the Stone eventually falls on them.

A warning

Down through Christian history this text has been grievously misused. It has been used to suggest that God has utterly repudiated his chosen people and because of that deserve ignominy and abuse. It is a terrible misunderstanding. Jesus has come to the vineyard to reclaim for his Father.

In the words of Isaiah 5 that lie behind the parable The Lover sings a love song about his vineyard. He is in love with it. They are his pleasant planting. However, it has a virulent disease.

"...he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
"righteousness, but heard a cry." (7)

And that is relevant to the interpretation of Matthew's allegory. This story of Jesus is God's continuing love song to his people.

This story is not about the rejection of God's ancient people and its replacement with the church. It is about the old prophetic complaint that the leaders of God's people will not hear his voice wooing them because they are addicted to power and consequently to injustice and violence.

And that leads me think about our reaction to this scary challenging story.

Hearing the Word of God

The most obvious element of the story is the human capacity to hear what God is saying and ignore it. Jesus told another parable about this problem. We call it the parable of the Sower.

It is a parable about listening and discerning the word of God, in Jesus' instance, the call to the kingdom and the importance of hearing, discerning and then bearing fruit i.e. living it out; making the necessary changes in our lives, picking up the kingdom agenda.

“Pay attention to what you hear” he once said, “The measure you give will be the measure you get.” (Mark4.24)

The classic story in the OT is Elijah fleeing to Mt. Horeb (1Kings 19). Terrified by Jezebel's threats of violence he flees. He not only flees he also loses all sense of perspective, thinking himself abandoned and alone even though God has met him on the way and supplied his needs. And still the word of God meets him. But most importantly not in roaring wind, raging fire or crushing earthquake but in a sound of sheer silence. The word of God addresses Elijah again, Elijah sets out his complaint again, but now with all the noise gone he can hear God's word to go about the business of the rule of God for that time. His mission begins again.

The discernment of the word of God in our lives is perhaps one of the most important elements of our life with God. And perhaps one of its most neglected. We need to be taught and we need to practice. Even taught and practised we will still fall into Elijah's trap. The noises of fear, humiliation, rage and myriads of other everyday human emotions will block the sound of sheer silence.

Listening to the word of God to us is a humbling experience and yet liberating, too.

But listening leads to something else.

Fruitful faith

In the parable of the sower Jesus speaks of the production of fruit. In Matthew's Gospel it is a distinct theme. And in this parable the owner is looking for the fruits that Jesus calls the fruits of the kingdom.

We know these of course: Mercy, justice, peace, love of enemies, non-retaliation, rejection of violence and love of power, truthfulness and joy. The Gospel, like the prophets, abounds with such pictures of the fruits of the kingdom.

Jesus accuses his opponents of not bringing forth the fruits of the kingdom. They will be replaced by others who do because what God is doing is establishing a people who display the fruits of the kingdom for the world to see.

Those people are not somebody else. They are you and me.

And we face the same fork in the road. It is the fruits of the kingdom that matter. It is producing the fruits of the kingdom that matter; love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, truthfulness, the rejection of the love of power and violence.

The reality of judgment

There is still the disconcerting theme of judgment to reflect on. Some people seem to think of judgment as a great day of getting back at enemies, a day of revenge, an idea we rightly reject in everyday life but some seem happy to attribute to God at some future time. Such

a view is unworthy of God. After all, it seems we have better morals than God.

In fact Scripture makes it clear that judgment happens all the time in our history just as this story makes clear.

The Lover's unrequited love wants to attract their attention again; he wants to pull us up short as in the story of the leaders today. Their own answer should have stopped them in their tracks.

God pulls us up short and creates a crisis for us is to help us clear away the noise and listen again. It is a redemptive act. It is an act of mercy, asking us to listen to the still small voice, to pay attention to the Spirit of truth.

The point of judgment happening now is that we can take the opportunity to let go of our personal agendas and pick up God's kingdom agenda once again.

This call of the lover is not punishment. It brings us up short, putting the question to us, "Where is all this heading?"

And that is what is happening in our story today. The leaders of Israel face the crisis of Jesus in their midst. They can turn now. They can listen to the Lover's voice.

But we know that the story goes on to tell how Israel, through its official representatives, is going to refuse the demand, and will end killing the Son. Violence and power will succeed. The love goes unrequited.

Conclusion

In our noise will we hear the voice of the Lover? Will we hear the word of God? Will we obey the word of God? Will we live out the fruits of righteousness?