

## Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 17 – 9am & 10.30 am Wesley – 5<sup>th</sup> October 2014

Reading: Matthew 21:33-46 'The parable of the wicked tenants'

Theme: 'Called to Faithfulness'

Text: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce fruit." Matthew 21:43

### Background

Matthew's version of the parable of the Wicked Tenants is the second in a series of three parables that Jesus tells in the temple. The setting and the context of the parable are crucial to its interpretation. Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding on a colt and been acclaimed as the messianic Son of David and we read 'the whole city was in turmoil' in the earlier part of Matthew 21 in verse 10a.

This acclamation of Jesus as the Son of David continues when he goes to the temple and overturns the tables of the money changes, prompting the chief priests and scribes to ask angrily; "Do you hear what these are saying?" (Matthew 21:16). Jesus leaves the city for the night. When he returns the next morning, he curses a fruitless fig tree, symbolizing the coming destruction of Jerusalem and disempowerment of the temple leadership. After this he enters the temple and not surprisingly encounters a challenge to his authority which was the set Gospel for last Sunday, in Matthew 21:23-27. The three parables that follow respond to this challenge and each speaks directly to the Jewish leaders and not necessarily to the people as a whole.

Thus from last Sunday's first parable where Jesus says, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31), he judges the religious leaders, not the Jews as a people. It is in this vein that we have the second parable of this trilogy that is also damning of the religious leaders.

Let us look at the Gospel for today, with this background in mind, so that we do not look at the Scripture in isolation but have it in context.

### Matthew 21:33-46

The basis for today's parable is to be found in Isaiah 5:1-7 which identifies Israel as 'the vineyard of the Lord of hosts' and predicts judgement for Israel's failure to yield good grapes. The Jewish leaders could not fail to hear the allusion to themselves, particularly since the Jewish commentary identified the vineyard also with the temple itself.

Jesus' parable intensifies the meaning of Isaiah 5:1-7 by combining it with the traditional Jewish motif of rejection of the prophets of old. Also in the parable we have three delegations sent to the tenants in ascending rank and three rejections, ascending in their degree of violence to the emissaries of the master. The identity of Jesus himself as the owner's son (vss 37-8), with its subtle hint of impending violence, is left for the readers to infer. The parable culminates in the judgement commanded by the owner: the death of the tenants and the transfer of the vineyard to others.

Note that the judgement is given, not by Jesus, but by the chief priest and scribes in response to Jesus' parable. They condemn themselves, which is amazing and of course adds to their fury, at the end of the passage, against Jesus as they realise the teaching of the parable.

From Psalm 118: 22-23 Jesus uses this passage to refer to himself.

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”.

Initially this stone had no place in the building but has now become the capstone, literally 'the head of a corner' which finishes off a building. This distinguished place is an oblique reference to Jesus being the high point of God's plan. One that is rejected becomes the one central to everything in God's sight. So different from what the religious hierarchy of the day thought. Those that thought they were the inherent keepers of God's law will in fact be shattered by it as they have not cared for God's messengers let alone God's Son.

They have judged themselves and been found wanting.

#### Reflection for ourselves

I struggled with aspects of the reading for today, partly because I'm seen as a religious leader and is this an indictment on my ministry. In a sense we are all in ministry and Jesus' parable has the punch line right at the end of this passage. Probably a word for all of us to consider personally and reflect upon particularly as we come in a few moments to share the bread and wine, the symbols of Jesus ministry past, present and future, with and for us.

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce fruit.” (verse 43)

It raises questions here:    Is this allegorical in meaning?  
  Is this specific to spiritual fruit?  
  Is this specific to the way we/I follow Jesus?

Jesus' parables are still disturbing for us today as they challenge our faithfulness, our obedience, to the God who has given us the law and the prophets and then his only Son and calls on us to follow him. Reflect on this and your faith journeying as we share the eucharist, Jesus' 'love meal' together. Amen.