

# ***The Messenger And Us***

**Matthew 21:33-46**

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One thing you have to say about Jesus - he never backed away from a confrontation. There he was, having entered Jerusalem on a donkey, people gathered around with palm branches and a carpet of coats -  
- an event we'll celebrate here next Sunday -

Jesus enters Jerusalem and heads to the temple.

He confronts those who had found a way to turn the outer prayer area into a marketplace and evicts them forcibly.

Later he is confronted by the leadership - chief priests and elders. They challenge what he does. Jesus doesn't hesitate to respond. And as part of that response gives the parable we just read.

A withering indictment against those gathered round him. And they knew it. Knew it, and didn't dare to do anything about it.

Indeed - When you want to challenge Jesus, be careful what you say. The response may be more than you bargained for!

Jesus uses an image of a vineyard.

Not the first time that he did it.

Actually, the parable immediately before this also speaks of a vineyard.

Also while he's tearing a strip off the leaders.

Why?

Because the vineyard was a well-known image for God's people.

The prophet Isaiah sings about it in chapter 5:

1 Now I will sing a song for the one I love about his vineyard: My beloved has a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill.

2 He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with choice vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks... 7 This is the story of the LORD's people. They are the vineyard of the LORD Almighty... his pleasant garden.

God made a community, loved that community and put a leadership in that community which he expects to care for it on his behalf.

That leadership was standing around Jesus.

They were challenging Jesus.

And Jesus alludes to the last verses of Isaiah's song:

He expected justice, but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness, but heard a cry! (v.7)

The outcome, says Isaiah, will be judgement.

Which is what Jesus says to the chief priests and elders, too.

They will be judged.

They will be condemned.

They will be evicted.

And that which they had tried to claim for themselves will be taken from them.

Trying to take and grab and hold,  
they will be left with nothing.

And those who had nothing initially,  
will be granted everything.

In an immediate, historical context Jesus is speaking about all the prophets that have been sent to exercise God's claim to authority over Israel.

Over the centuries many had been badly treated.

Killed, even. Including Zechariah who was murdered in church.

The tenants had begun to resent the landowner and begun to treat the estate as if it belonged to them.

Why the animosity between the tenants and the Landowner? We're not really told. We do know that the owner was away. My guess is that the tenants became distracted. Vineyards take about 5 seasons to mature. During those years vegetables would be grown between the rows to make some money. Perhaps the tenants forgot about the vines. Or perhaps, with not seeing the owner on a face-to-face basis every day, they allowed a silly dream to take shape in their imagination - a dream that there was NO owner, that THEY were the ones in charge and that THEY could do however they pleased.

A little like the child whose parents had stepped out of the house for a while. And the little terror figured that she could do whatever, however, while they were gone. Beginning with emptying the cookie jar, and going from there. All rules are off while mom and dad are gone. Right?

Well, if that's how the mind is working, then a parental parousia - mom walking in the front door - is less than welcomed!

It's silly, and yet how often it tends to occur.

Like people who treat their office environment as if it belongs to themselves and using their time and resources for personal endeavors when the boss isn't around.

The vineyard has been prepared.

The landowner has taken a risk, sinking a lot of resources into its preparation.  
It's all there - ready to go.  
And the landowner is willing to wait - to give everything the time it needs to mature.

He invests his personal resources.  
Gives it his time.  
And gives his trust to those whom he puts in charge.  
He trusts them.

He trusts them to care for the place.  
He trusts them to use it in the way it was intended to be used.  
He trusts them to give back to him what rightly is his.  
He trusts them.

And is badly let down.

Israel's leaders killed the prophets, servants of the Landowner.  
And they were about to kill the son of the Landowner.  
You have to wonder if the hearts of the chief priests and elders skipped a beat at this point in the story, since they'd been plotting Jesus' death for some time now.

They would know that Jesus was talking about them.  
They would know that **HE** knew.

What they wouldn't know was the second part of the parable.  
The second part is a little more obscure.  
It is a quote from Psalm 118 - the rejected stone becoming a cornerstone or capstone, depending on the translation you read.  
The little stone becomes the greatest stone.  
And that great stone crushes all who oppose it.

From today's point of view we see it meaning Jesus, whose seemingly small life was raised up from the dead to be Lord of All.  
History has changed through him.  
And all who oppose him will face eternal condemnation.  
They will be crushed.

Those ancient leaders would be crushed.  
And, indeed, that did happen.  
This parable is not first of all talking about the end of times.

It is a reference to A.D.70, when Roman armies marched into Palestine and destroyed the temple, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, blood flowing thick through the streets.

The Jewish leaders refused to honour God's authority. They treated the nation as if it were their own - motivated by their own greed.

And were condemned as a result.

While the Lord is gracious and tender, and while he gives people chance after chance, there comes an end to the grace.

And the end is when a person rejects the Lord's Son.

There are no more chances after that.

Such rejection is final.

To reject the Son of the Lord is to reject the Lord Himself.

Period.

It's a tough parable, that way.

And to think about it as it applies to those Jews of long ago is sobering.

Here's the deal, though.

It's not just about them.

It speaks very much to us today, too.

It speaks to us on three levels.

The first level is the level of the Church.

I can do a whole song and dance here, waltzing you through a bunch of bible passages. But let me leave the singing (and dancing?) to the choir.

Let me simply say that when you read of vineyard, think the beloved Church of Jesus Christ.

And consider, then, how often we walk around speaking about "**MY** church... **OUR** church."

Ever done it?

And we begin to discuss what we want OUR church to look like and sound like and be programmed like.

Till the Son comes

the one who has been taken outside the city, and murdered on a hilltop, only to rise again three days later.

the Son with all authority over heaven and earth

the Son who is the cornerstone of the Universe.

It is His vineyard.

"I am the vine. You are the branches." says Jesus.

We are not in this church to get what we want from it.  
Or to do what we please with it.  
It is to be of service to the Landowner of all Creation,  
the one who reaches out declaring,  
"There isn't one square inch of it that doesn't belong to me."

Which is the second level.  
When you think of vineyard, think of all creation.  
Think of the garden of Paradise, which God first created.  
Indeed - how often don't we tramp through this world as if it belongs to us, to  
be used by us, as we want.  
In tossing litter at the side of the road.  
In consuming precious resources.  
In flushing pollutants down the drain or into the air.  
In sharing the blessings of food and housing and peace.  
It doesn't belong to us.  
There is a Holy One to whom we are accountable.

And then the third level - that is the level of our own lives.  
For God has made each of us as wonderful Creations.  
Each of us sacred and eternal beings.  
And he has placed us in bodies to be valued.  
Our lives are not our own, to be used by us, as we want.  
Nor are the lives of others to be used for our own pleasure and comfort.

The son of the Landowner comes to us.  
He calls us to recognize our place -  
- not as independent owners, running too and fro, free on this earth.

He calls to us as one with authority.  
Real authority.  
Final authority.  
Authority that demands a response.  
To reject him is to reject the final and only way to God.  
Yes, he calls us with authority.

And, yet, more than that.  
He calls us as brothers and sisters, he calls us as family.  
He calls us as friends.  
In John 15 he said, "No longer do I call you servants. Instead, I have called  
you friends."

He wants more than just payment.

He wants more than just service.

He wants a relationship with us.

He, who has given absolutely everything for us, desires us to give everything we have to Him.

And so, what is our response?

Will we acknowledge him?

Honour him?

Respond to him?

In the Church?

In the world?

In our bodies?

Or do we, as it were, line up on the side of those who killed him by in a sense

"killing" his presence in our lives?

By ignoring what is written in His great Word, his love letter to us?

By behaving and thinking as though he didn't exist?

Hebrews 13:15 says "through Him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

We've been doing that here this evening.

Indeed, may that continue through the week to come.

And throughout our lives.

Amen.