

17th Sunday after Trinity

Collect; Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Philippians 3.4b–14; Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21.33–end ‘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 watch-tower. 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 realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Reflection

Usually when I prepare to sit down and write a reflection I am really joyful about what to say. This was not one of those times. Our Gospel reading describes a parable where things are not so good. The epistle talks of Paul giving up all that was important to him to follow Christ. So all I can really do is pick apart the readings and see what is being spoken to us today.

Usually when we look at a parable there is one key message and the details are not all that important. This one is different. Every detail seems to be important. Each aspect is representative. The Landlord represents God the Father. The vineyard is the world and the workers in the field are the Jewish Authorities. The Landlord sent a slave or messenger to the tenants. These represent the prophets. Their treatment of the prophets wasn’t great. One was beaten, one was killed and another was stoned. So what does our landlord do? He sends his son. Despite the treatment of the

messengers, He sends his only son. The Tenants throw out his son from the vineyard, they reject him and kill him.

Bearing in mind this was told by Jesus shortly after his triumphant return to Jerusalem which we celebrate on Palm Sunday. Jesus knows what will happen but rather than just telling the disciples, as they would be then trying to stop what was to occur, he asks his disciples "now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to the tenants?"

They answer quite eagerly that he will put the wretched tenants to death and lease the vineyard to other tenants. I always feel a bit like one of the disciples, very keen to engage but often getting it wrong. I can hear Him now, chastising them "Have you never read the scriptures? The Discarded stone will become the cornerstone." It is easy to imagine sitting around the fire with Jesus talking about a parable of tenants in the vineyard and the disciples all trying to understand what was being taught.

So what is being taught? Well this is what I think. This parable tells us a lot about God. (funny that) It says that God trusts us with the world and allows us to encourage growth and development. We are in the world and allowed to make our own decisions about how to treat the world. Unfortunately I think that we are not being very good tenants. It also teaches us about God's patience and mercy. He keeps sending messengers despite how they are being treated. He keeps giving us a chance to respond.

This Parable also teaches us about what it means to be human. We have been allowed into this wonderful vineyard and if you think of the world as a vineyard it is truly a privilege and a joyous gift. Perhaps we don't always see it but whenever you stop and look there is beauty and abundance. We are given the freedom to make our own choices and like the tenants we are sinful and don't always respond to God as we should.

But Mainly this is teaching us about Jesus. He was not just another messenger but rather the son of the Landlord. Despite knowing what has happened to the earlier messengers, His Son is sent. Knowing that he was going to be killed and yet he was still sent.

Can you see why I wasn't feeling too joyful with this in my heart?

Perhaps Paul can pick up the mood a bit from his Epistle to the Philippians? The way I read this makes me imagine someone who had it all and gave it all away. I was circumcised (by the way, the bible often talks about circumcision but really they meant that all the laws were followed), I was circumcised, member of the people Israel, a Pharisee, a zealot and a persecuter of the church. Everything a young man in Jerusalem in the 1st century would want. A real achiever, a go getter, one of the best and the brightest, Nice house, beautiful wife, lovely car. You know the sort. But in following Christ, he realises that this is all a loss in life. It is not something we should aspire to. He had been following the wrong path, it was not making him complete.

Again I am not filled with joy at the prospect of giving up everything I enjoyed or any of my privileges to follow Christ.

But what should we take from the readings today? Well, both say something of moving away from the traditionalists and the law makers. I am not suggesting throwing off the shackles of our oppressive government and rebelling. But rather we need to highlight those in society who are the modern day "Pharisees and chief priests" and have them fear the crowds just like those who had listened to Jesus tell the parable of the tenants. Who are these people today? In our world of celebrity status influencers, fat cat city brokers, far right wannabe politicians and uncaring self

interested socialites we need to hold up a light to their lack of anything of value. In this way the rejected stone that was Jesus will continue to be the cornerstone of our life and faith and allow us to build even further.

In order to walk with Christ we need to do those things which we know to be a sacrifice and question as to why we are doing things in the way we are. Why are we all encouraged to get more money, have a better house, buy a bigger car? Why is it ok to use single use plastics, ignore the homeless and allow people in our community to be lonely? What sacrifice can I make that will better tend to the vineyard and all that are in it? What about donating the money that you used to spend on commuting to the poor or homeless? Reduce the use of fossil fuels at home? Why not think about the people who live in your street and keep checking they are ok and if they want to chat? Call all the people you know that live alone. These are the things which will allow us to be more like Paul and truly understand what Jesus taught his disciples all those years ago and what he continues to teach each of us today.