

Sunday Homily

17TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

4 OCTOBER 2020

YEAR A

“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.”

Matthew 21:43

Illustration

The congregation had been looking forward to this particular service for a long time. It was to be their normal weekly Communion, but their guest speaker was in such popular demand that the booking had had to be made over a year ago.

The sense of eager anticipation grew as the service progressed, until all stood for the reading of the Gospel. That day, it was the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, praying in the Temple. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people...”; and the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

Slowly the preacher ascended the pulpit, praying that both he and his listeners might be open to the love and truth of God. For a moment he looked round the expectant congregation, making eye contact with each one. And then he spoke. “Hands up,” he said, “anybody who didn’t think, ‘Thank God I’m not like that Pharisee!’” And then he returned to his seat.

Gospel Teaching

The parable of the wicked tenants is the third “vineyard” parable recorded by Matthew in quick succession, following those of the labourers in the vineyard (20:1-16), and a father’s two sons sent to work in the vineyard (21:28-32). Today’s parable and the one immediately preceding it take place in the context of the Pharisees’ demand to know from where Jesus’ authority comes, a demand Jesus refuses to answer directly.

There is a sense of urgency about his cryptic response: “What do you think?... Listen to another parable...” After hearing the parable of the tenants, the penny finally drops: “When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them.” They were prevented from arresting Jesus there and then only because of their fear of the crowds, who believed he was a prophet.

For Matthew, the slaves whom the master sends to his vineyard clearly represent the succession of prophets who were sent to a rebellious Israel. The son stands for Jesus, and the tenants represent Israel’s leaders, who kill him rather than acknowledge the master’s claims. In Mark’s version of this parable, the son is

killed and then unceremoniously dumped outside the vineyard. In Matthew's version the son is taken outside the vineyard and then killed, corresponding to the actual sequence of events of Jesus' Passion (27:32).

Jesus reinforces the meaning of the parable by his reference to the stone that the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone, with a clear implication that he is that cornerstone. The kingdom will be taken away from those who have rejected it – Israel – and will be given to those who will faithfully produce its fruits.

Application

Matthew's account of this parable has caused commentators and preachers some difficulty, and indeed, previous lectionaries avoided it altogether. The human tendency to look for a scapegoat is one that is very deeply ingrained; so much so that we often don't even realise that we're doing it.

The preacher from our illustration was aware of this. We listen to the Pharisee, and Jesus' reaction to his prayer, and without even thinking about it we congratulate ourselves on not being so smugly self-righteous. Surely, we would never pray like that?

And yet it is an uncomfortable fact that many Christians throughout history have been only too willing to interpret today's text in a narrowly focused way, so fuelling the fires of anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism and all their resulting horrors. There has been a tendency to view such texts as in some way letting Christians "off the hook" ("Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee!").

It is important that we allow Matthew to speak from within his own conditioned perspective, but it is equally important that we do not accept it as the only view, allowing it to limit our own. A wider biblical perspective is offered by Paul: a Jew-become-Christian who saw that the larger plan of God embraced both Jew and Gentile, Israel and Church (Romans 9–11).

At the close of the parable Jesus speaks, not of the rejection of Israel, but of the kingdom of God being taken away from "you" and given to people who produce the fruits of the kingdom. The kingdom allows for no scapegoats: we, too, are addressed in that "you". We are weak and fallible human beings, with little of which to be proud. Our salvation comes not through finding scapegoats, but in owning our weakness and throwing ourselves on the mercy of God.