

MATTHEW 21: 33-46. The Tenants of the Vineyard.
5th October 2014, CCO and StJN.

Father, open our minds and our hearts to receive your word. Amen.

We have in Matthew's gospel a number of parables which give a clear warning to the hearers. Many of them, like this one, are directed at the leaders of the Jewish people in Jesus' day, and it is not surprising that the chief priests and elders, and those with power, found them uncomfortable to hear, and found in Jesus a real threat. Jesus was scandalised at the way the religious leaders had led the people away from love and true worship of God and got them bogged down in rules and regulations, which hid the spirit of God and the truth from them.

So there is a straightforward interpretation of this parable of the tenants of the vineyard: the landowner represents God; the vineyard represents Israel, the children of God; the tenants are the leaders of the Jewish people; the servants that are beaten and stoned are the prophets sent by God to give his word to his people, and finally the son represents Jesus, who is rejected and killed by those who are supposed to serve his father.

Jesus tells his story and then turns the tables on the chief priests and elders by asking them what the landowner will do to the tenants of the vineyard. Having missed the point of the parable, they reply that the landowner will kill those evil men and let the vineyard out to other tenants. Interestingly, Jesus moderates this and tells them that Kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits. The old order will pass away; God is doing a new thing; God will create a new people for his own: the church of Christ.

So the meaning here is clear: God had put the Kingdom in the hands of the leaders of Israel, and what had they done? They had enjoyed the privilege, but had not taken the responsibility. They had become so familiar with the vineyard and their work in it, that they had forgotten about the owner. They had taken things into their own hands, forgotten the owner's instructions and treated the place as though they owned it. They really did not want any interference from him, thank-you, and they rejected all his attempts at making contact with them. As a consequence, they were going to lose it all.

A dire warning indeed, fulfilled in the complete destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. The kingdom was given into hands of the followers of Jesus, the new Christian church.

And that surely means that now we are the tenants of the vineyard. We have been entrusted with the Gospel message, and with the church. They are not ours, they do not belong to us. We share them, we benefit from them, we are charged with responsibility, in our time, for what happens to them. Do we see ourselves as tenants in that way?

Some might think that it applies more to the clergy than to the ordinary Christian. But I don't think that's really true. Yes, as priests, we take on the responsibility of leadership. But each and every Christian receives the Gospel and becomes a member of God's church. And each and every Christian thus has a responsibility before God to work and serve, so that the Gospel message is passed on and the Church glorifies God the Father, through our love of him, of his people and of his world.

So I think we are tenants in two ways. We are tenants in that we have a responsibility for the Kingdom, but we are tenants too of God's good creation.

We are tenants of this planet, which God has created with infinite love and wisdom and care, and which he has entrusted to us. I wonder how pleased he is with the way we humans have looked after his earth?

Just this week we have heard that in the last 45 years over 40% of the world's wild animals have disappeared. That has happened under our watch: we can be held responsible. As someone put it: It may not "matter" to *me* that the gibbon or the viper become extinct, any more than it matters to me that a park I never visit goes under housing or a coral reef disappears to mass fishing. What does matter is my awareness of my relationship to the rest of God's creation. Reports such as this one *remind* us what is happening. We can choose what to do about it, each in our small way. It may not be much. But being *aware* of what is happening is the first step; *caring* enough to *do* something is the second one.

Research by scientists at WWF and the Zoological Society of London has found that creatures across land, rivers and the seas are being lost as humans kill them for food in unsustainable numbers, while polluting or destroying their habitats.

"If half the animals died in London zoo next week it would be front page news," said Professor Ken Norris, ZSL's director of science. "But that is happening in the great outdoors. This damage is not inevitable but a consequence of the way we choose to live."

When I go away to visit family or have a holiday, I have to leave our smallholding in the care of someone else. I am a bit particular! Over the years I have found what works best, and I like the person I leave in charge to do things my way. The landowner in the parable put a lot of work into making his vineyard, putting a fence round it, digging the wine press, building a watchtower to keep it safe. Gerald and I have put a lot of work into making our holding how we

want it to be. I can imagine how horrified I would be if I were to go away for while, and then return to find the sheep all thin and scrawny, the hens disappeared, the fields full of weeds, the lambs sold and the money gone! I would not be at all happy. I would be mad at the person in charge for having failed to look after the place properly, for having ignored my instructions, done what they pleased, and profited at my expense and the expense of the little farm.

I wonder if that's how God feels when he looks at what we are doing to his planet.

Remember the problem with the tenants in the vineyard was that they forgot who *they* were, and who the vineyard belonged to. They chose to ignore his instructions, take things into their own hands and do things their own way. Recipe for disaster. I remember a lovely little cartoon from some years ago which depicted a globe, planet earth, with a little label attached to it which read; 'For best results, follow the maker's instructions.'

God may not have given us detailed instructions about how to live on this earth or care for it, but we know that he provided clean air, clean water, good soil, an earth teeming with life, productive land – in fact everything we need to live, and all for free. Have we humans been good tenants of this beautiful, amazing earth?

We have polluted the clean air, polluted the clean rivers and seas, damaged the ozone layer that protected us, we have driven many of the animals to extinction, destroyed much of the forest that maintains important balances in our weather and atmosphere. I'm afraid that if we face the honest truth, we have to admit that we have trashed great swathes of this earth – and that's before we even think about global climate change.

Currently, the global population is cutting down trees faster than they regrow, catching fish faster than the oceans can restock, pumping water from rivers and aquifers faster than rainfall can replenish them and emitting more climate-warming carbon dioxide than oceans and forests can absorb.

Today's average global rate of consumption would need 1.5 planet Earths to sustain it. To sustain levels of consumption in the United States would need four planets; to match UK consumption levels, 2.5 Earths are needed. The poor earth simply cannot go on satisfying our greed.

In our Eucharist, we celebrate God's good gifts to us: this is not just a spiritual exercise or experience. Christianity takes matter, stuff, very seriously. We believe in the incarnation: God taking our flesh and living on this earth alongside us. And what does Jesus command us to do? He commands us to take the basic stuff of our physical existence, the bread and wine, to bring it to him, and let him transform it, so that it feeds us body and soul. We are all of a piece with the whole of creation, we are inextricably tied in with it and we depend on it for our existence. God has left us in charge; let us learn to be better tenants of our planet home. Amen.