

JESUS IS THE CORNERSTONE
Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost 2020
Matthew 21:33-46

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, Matthew 21:33-46: ³³ **“Listen to another parable! There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard out to some farmers and went away on a journey. ³⁴ When the vintage time approached, he sent his servants to the tenant-farmers to get his fruit. ³⁵ The tenant-farmers seized his servants, beat one, killed another and stoned a third. ³⁶ Then he sent other servants, more than the first, and the tenant-farmers treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ However, when the tenant-farmers saw his son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and let us get his inheritance!’ ³⁹ They took him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.**

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⁴¹ **They answered, “He will make those scoundrels die a miserable death and rent out the vineyard to other tenant-farmers, who will give him the fruit due to him at its right time.”**

⁴² **Jesus asked them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The Stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvellous for us to see’?”**

⁴³ **“Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and will be given to a nation that continues to produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this Stone will be dashed in pieces and, if it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”**

⁴⁵ **When the Chief Priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they knew that He was talking about them. ⁴⁶ Although they wanted to arrest Him, they were afraid of the crowds, because they regarded Him as a prophet.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

During Holy Week, on the first day of the week, Jesus had ridden a donkey from the Mount of Olives to the temple while the Passover pilgrims gathered around and praised Him. Jesus chased the merchants and moneychangers out of the temple and healed some people. *“When He had come to the Temple, the Chief Priests and the elders of the people came to Him while He was teaching. They asked, “By what authority are You doing these things?” and “Who has given You this authority?””* (Matthew 21:23). Jesus responded with a question of His own, *“From where did the baptism of John come? Was it from heaven or from men?”* (Matthew 21:25). The temple authorities were afraid to answer Jesus’ question, and so Jesus declined to answer their question. However, that does not mean that Jesus stopped talking to the chief priests and the elders. He continued to speak with them and about them. Our Gospel lesson today is just one of the parables Jesus told while He was in the temple that day.

In a few days, Judas would betray Jesus. In less than a week, Jesus would suffer, die on the cross, and rise from the dead. The chief priests and the elders were already having secret talks about how to destroy Jesus. Jesus knew that this was coming when He told this parable, **“Listen to another parable! There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard out to some farmers and went away on a journey. ³⁴ When the vintage time approached, he sent his servants to the tenant-farmers to get his fruit.”**

The setup for this parable is very familiar territory. No doubt many of the Passover pilgrims who listened to Jesus had seen vineyards just like the one in this parable. His listeners would have been familiar with the idea of renting land for a share of the crops it produced. There may even have been vineyard owners and workers listening to Jesus when He told the parable

Within the context of this parable, the landowner is clearly God the Father. When it says he **“put a wall around”** his vineyard, we are reminded of how the people of Israel had lived in the land of Goshen, separate from the Egyptians. When they took possession of the Promised Land, the Lord ordered them to exterminate all the Canaanites so that there would be no temptation to mingle with them. Although those orders were never completely carried out, the ceremonial law kept Israel separate from their neighbours by restricting their diet and regulating their worship. God wanted to set them apart from all other people so that it would be obvious to all that He had kept His promises to Abraham.¹

¹ Genesis 22:17-18

In addition to putting a wall around his vineyard, the landowner also built a **watchtower** in it. It would be necessary to post guards, especially when the grapes ripened. The image of the watchman is reminiscent of the call of Ezekiel, “*Son of man, I have appointed you as a watchman over the family of Israel*” (Ezekiel 3:17).

The **vineyard** represented Israel. The many details involved in the planting of the vineyard showed that God had blessed Israel with all it needed to thrive and grow. The tenant-farmers were the leaders of the Jews, and the **servants** who were sent to collect the landowner’s share of the crop were the Old Testament prophets. The fruit they expected would be repentance and faith. However, Jesus says that the tenant-farmers “**beat one, killed another and stoned a third.**” Similarly, Stephen would later accuse the leaders of the Jews, “*Stubborn people and uncircumcised in hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit. As your fathers have done it, you are doing it too.*”⁵² *Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who announced that the Righteous One would come, and now you have become the ones who have betrayed and murdered Him*” (Acts 7:51-52). The tenant-farmers turned out to be violent, insane criminals. There was no sense to what they were doing. Only the most stupid arrogance would believe it could get away with such a crime.

Israel had a violent history towards God’s prophets and other servants. The writer to the Hebrews describes the life of the prophet very well when he writes, “*Other people were tortured. They did not accept deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.*”³⁶ *Others experienced mocking and whippings and even chains and imprisonment.*”³⁷ *They were stoned, tempted, sawn in two and put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins. They were destitute, oppressed and tormented.*”³⁸ *The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground*” (Hebrews 11:35–38). Israel’s history towards the prophets was one of unbelieving rebellion, violence, and torture.

Under these circumstances, the landowner had every right to punish these tenants with death, and that is exactly what an ordinary landowner would do. However, the landowner in the parable *is not ordinary*. “**He sent other servants, more than the first, and the tenant-farmers treated them in the same way.**”

Here Jesus illustrated the incredible mercy and grace of God. Instead of judging Israel and destroying it, God had sent more prophets. This teaching was consistent with the words God had given to Ezekiel. “*As surely as I live, declares the Lord GOD, I certainly take no pleasure in the death of a wicked person. Rather, I take pleasure in the wicked person’s turning from his way that he may live. Turn back! Turn back from your evil ways! Why, then, will you die, family of Israel?*” (Ezekiel 33:11). God had offered life to Israel. Nevertheless, God’s prophets continued to suffer cruel violence.

At this point, the landowner in the parable did something insane. “**Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’**” Given the history of these tenants, no earthly landowner would do this. An earthly landowner would send his son at the head of an army with orders to destroy the tenants – never would he send his son to collect the fruit of the vineyard.

The amazing thing is that Jesus was teaching about Himself at this point in the parable. He Himself is the Son of God. He has come just as the prophets came before Him. In Luke’s version of this parable, the owner of the vineyard calls him “*my son, whom I love*” (Luke 20:13), an echo of the Father’s voice at Jesus’ baptism² and on the Mount of Transfiguration.³

As Jesus continued, the tenants revealed the extent of their insanity. “³⁸ **However, when the tenant-farmers saw his son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and let us get his inheritance!’**”³⁹ **They took him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.**”

Who in their right mind would believe that they could become the heirs to an estate by killing the current heir to the estate? Has there ever been a legal system in the history of the world that would allow such a thing?

Nevertheless, this parable is eerily accurate in its detail. The tenants threw the son out of the vineyard before they killed him. In a similar manner, Roman soldiers would lead Jesus out of Jerusalem and crucify Him. This parable illustrated the events that would happen to Jesus by the end of the week.

Jesus closed the parable by asking His hearers to judge the tenants in the parable: ⁴⁰ “**Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenant-farmers?**”

⁴¹ **They answered, ‘He will make those scoundrels die a miserable death and rent out the vineyard to other tenant-farmers, who will give him the fruit due to him at its right time.’**

The judgment is death. The owner will kill the tenants and replace them with faithful people. There is a hot place in hell for those who violate the precious trust God has placed in their hands and do not repent. This parable is terrifying in its judgment.

² Matthew 3:17

³ Matthew 17:5

The sad thing about this parable is that it is God's intent to make all people fellow heirs with Christ as the Apostle Paul once said: "*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirits that we are God's children,* ¹⁷ *and that, if we are children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, since indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified with Him*" (Romans 8:16-17). So, within the context of the parable, it was the landowner's intent to make the tenants heirs with His son. The landowner intended to freely give them the very thing they had tried to take by violence. The insanity of their evil not only caused them to lose this gift, but their lives as well. They could have had it all, but they lost it all instead.

The parable in today's Gospel is a true tragedy. It ends with a dead son and damned tenants. Jesus was not satisfied with this ending, so He followed it with a quote from Psalm 118.⁴ "**Jesus asked them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The Stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvellous for us to see'?"** In the process of constructing a building, the stonemason would select one stone and reject another. Not only did the Lord determine to make use of the Stone the builders had rejected, He made it the capstone, the keystone of an arch, the most important stone in the whole building.

Jesus warned the chief priests and the Pharisees, "**Anyone who falls on this Stone will be dashed in pieces and, if It falls on anyone, It will crush him.**" As they plotted and schemed to put Jesus to death, He warned them that they would only destroy themselves. When a large stone falls on a man, the stone does not get hurt. God's judgment on them would be swift and terrible and final and inescapable. And Scripture says, "**they knew that He was talking about them.**"

As the rejected Stone had become the Cornerstone, so Jesus Himself did not remain rejected. Although Jesus died in rejection, He did not remain in the grave. He rose from the dead to become the Cornerstone upon which the Church depends.

Under God's grace, even the evil tenants need not be damned. Maybe some of those who voted to crucify Jesus later repented. Maybe they heard the preaching of the Apostles and received the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit. Perhaps, through that gift of faith in the One whom they crucified, some of these people are now in heaven praising God.

God's grace is for all. He wants to give it to us freely for the sake of the perfect life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If we insist that God must save us on our terms, then we shall follow the example of the wicked tenants in the parable. However, when God has His way, we shall die in Christ and follow Him. We shall not remain in the grave but will rise from the dead just as Christ has arisen. We are already sons and daughters of the living God. Jesus has placed His righteousness in our hearts, and we shall live with Him forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

O God our Father, Lord of all, the creator and sustainer of all things in heaven and on earth, we bow before You in worship, and bring before You our praise and our prayers. In the name of Your only Son Jesus Christ, we ask You to forgive us our many sins, and to rescue us from what we deserve because of them. Come into our lives with Your power, and save us from the temptations and dangers that threaten us.

We recognise our own weakness and know we need Your help. Without Your strength we can do nothing. Therefore, give us the power and blessing of Your Holy Spirit, so that we may stand in the grace You gave us in Baptism, and that we may live a life that measures up to the standard You set when You called us to faith. Inspire us with the Gospel about Your delivering up the Son of Man into the hands of sinful men. Because we humbly receive all spiritual blessings from You, take away our stubborn self-wills, and lead us to do Your perfect will. Take away our pride and conceit, and make us humble. Take away our critical and grumbling spirit, and make us content. Take away our resentment and anger, and make us gentle and patient. Help us in love to put up with each other's faults and weaknesses, as people who have been made rich by Your love.

Pour out Your blessing on Your Church, O God. By the Spirit's power, make us one in heart and mind, in the peace of Christ. Enable us to grasp the Church's oneness in Christ in the truth of the Gospel. Take away from us our pride and sinful desire for pre-eminence. Inspire us by Jesus' humble service to us to serve You gratefully through serving our neighbours. Give us opportunities to demonstrate the confession of the Gospel before the world, that people may be drawn to Your Son and rejoice in Your salvation.

Give Your guidance and blessing to all lawful authority, especially to our Queen and her representatives, and the parliaments of our Commonwealth and State. Give them wisdom and sound judgment, that godliness may rule and evil be kept in check.

⁴ Psalm 118:22-23

Be the guardian of our homes and families. Make them places where Your Word is treasured, where faith in You produces love, and where love expresses itself in service to You and others. Give us weather appropriate to our needs.

Touch with Your healing power the sick, the sorrowing, and the suffering. Hear their cry, and remember them in Your mercy. Show them that You are the ever-present source of help, and the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

These things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

Isaiah 5:1-7

¹ Let me sing, about the One whom I love, a song of the One whom I love about His vineyard! The One whom I love had a vineyard on a fertile hilltop. ² He dug it over, removed its stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in the middle of it and cut out a wine-vat in it. Then He waited for it to produce grapes, but it produced bad grapes.

³ “Now, you who are living in Jerusalem and you men of Judah, decide, please, between Me and My vineyard! ⁴ What more should have been done for My vineyard than I have already done in it? When I waited for it to produce grapes, why did it produce only bad grapes? ⁵ Now therefore, please let Me inform you what I shall do to My vineyard! I shall tear away its hedge, and it will be destroyed. I shall break down its wall, and it will be trampled down. ⁶ I shall make it a wasteland. It will not be pruned or cultivated. Briars and thornbushes will grow up. I shall also command the clouds not to let any rain fall on it.”

⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the family of Israel, and the men of Judah are the plantation in which He had taken pleasure. He had waited for legal decisions but saw legal infringements. He had waited for justice but heard calls for help.

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{4b} If anyone else thinks that he has confidence in something bodily, I have more. ⁵ I was circumcised on the eighth day; I belong to the race of Israel, to the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. Concerning the Law, I was a Pharisee. ⁶ As for zeal, I used to persecute the church. As for the righteousness that is in the Law I was blameless. ⁷ However, I have reckoned those things that were gains to me as loss because of Christ. ⁸ However, more than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have lost all things and consider them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and to be found in Him, not having my own righteousness that is from the Law but having the righteousness that is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that is from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ, the power of His resurrection and fellowship in His sufferings, as I am conformed to His death, ¹¹ if, by any means, I shall attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² I do not mean that I have already

obtained this or have already been made perfect but eagerly strive to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ has also taken hold of me. ¹³ Fellow-Christians, I do not think I have taken hold of it. However, I do one thing: I forget the things that are behind and strain toward the things that are ahead. ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let as many of us as are mature think in this way! However, if you think differently about anything, God will also reveal this to you. ¹⁶ Only be guided by what we have learned so far!

Matthew 21:33-46

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