



Sunday 8 October 2017
Sermon by The Very Reverend Christine Wilson
The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

Our parable this morning is not for the faint hearted. It demands us to enter into the story and lift the lid on the truth about our human nature and our tendency to rebel against God. By way of introduction to this technique of Jesus to confront and challenge our comfort zone, let me read you some words from the Outline of History by H G Wells:

"He was like some terrible moral huntsman digging mankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived hitherto. In the white blaze of this kingdom of his there was no property, no privilege, no pride and precedence; no motive indeed and no reward but love. Is it any wonder that men were dazzled and blinded and cried out against him?"

The account of the wicked tenants is the parable where, finally, they get it! They realise that Jesus is pointing the finger at them.

But before we hunker down in our own snug burrow let us be clear that this story is not for onlookers. It is not about us and them - there is only US in this parable. The people for whom Christ came with the offer of life and of rescue from that rebellion against God.

In this Gospel we are confronted with our contradictions, our dark side and our wilfulness. Our tendency to try and exclude or eliminate those who get in the way, those who rock the boat, name the truth or disturb the comfortable peace.

To quote a bit more from H G Wells:

"For to take him seriously was to enter a strange alarming life, to abandon habits, to control instincts and impulses, ... is it any wonder that to this day this Galilean is too much for our small hearts?"

Jesus uses parables to shine the torchlight of truth-telling into our small hearts in order to demonstrate the God of surprises, who sends his Son to turn the world upside-down.

Christ delivers this parable standing in the Temple in Jerusalem. In other words, right in the firing line! He has already been into the Temple twice and upset the religious people. First he turns over the tables of the money lenders and then he confronts them with their rebelliousness and pride, pointing out that it is the prostitutes and the dishonest tax collectors who humbly turn to God in faith and are welcomed ahead of them into the kingdom of God. They receive mercy and inclusion whilst the religious Temple folk reject Christ and exclude themselves.

It's pointed out to them that the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. That they are perversely throwing out the very key to the Kingdom of God.

You may have observed that in the stuff of fairy-tales it is the frogs and the cinderellas who are the bearers of truth. It is the ones who are rejected who become pivotal to the whole story and the happy ending. If that is the case then perhaps we need more Cinderella's and frogs in our midst, those who are the outsiders and the people on the margins to teach us how to perceive the Kingdom.

When we look at the truth enacted by Jesus, we witness a man who dines with the wrong sort of people. Who refuses to be entrapped by awkward and clever questions. He sits lightly to all their laws and traditions choosing to put love and compassion first above all else. And as if that was not enough provocation, he calls them hypocrites. Hardly surprising then that they throw him out and plot to have him eliminated.

The landowner in the story planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press and built a watchtower. Then he leased it out and went to another country.

The vineyard was all set, ready to flourish with all the potential to produce wonderful fruit and an abundant supply of wine for rejoicing! The fence, which was presumably to keep the fruit secure, appears to have been turned into a sort of exclusion zone by the tenants. Even if there weren't any visible keep out signs, those inside the vineyard were quite clearly busy protecting their own interests. They are happy to resort to aggression and violence to keep things as they are. The vineyard had become an exclusion zone, instead of a place of fertility and productivity.

So? Was God angered or deeply saddened by their acts of exclusion? The keeping out of others? The refusal to allow the vineyard to fully flourish? The instincts and choices they made which brought about their own expulsion from this sort of second garden of Eden?

If the Kingdom of God bears fruit, as modelled through the life of Jesus Christ, then all the hallmarks of his ministry and his radical love will be seen in our own enactment and participation in the life of the Kingdom as we seek to follow Christ's example.

Think of all the beautiful enactments of hope and love, healing and inclusion that Jesus revealed in his life and ministry: hospitality and welcome to the stranger and the outcast, a generosity to the poor, compassion towards the vulnerable, healing and reconciliation, a passion for justice, and ultimately total self-surrender to the rule of love.

On the flip side, I wonder in what ways we throw ourselves out of this Kingdom? Self-exclusion would be about walking in the opposite direction, rejecting the teachings of Christ and putting up barriers to keep God's love out. Essentially it is about that tendency to smallness of heart: The mistrust of strangers, apathy towards the plight of the needy, complacency about the vulnerable, a lack of fruitfulness and joy.

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But the Good news we see in the story of the wicked tenants is the way God persistently keeps on coming back over and over again, battering our hearts with love and forgiveness, longing for us to embrace the Kingdom of God, willing us to produce even one little fruit bud.

"For God so loved the world that he sent his Son....."

He came for us all – the lovely and the unlovely, the rich and the poor, the sinner and the small hearted. The weak and the strong. Especially he came to the last and the least and the lost. It is openness to the truth and the enactment of goodness and love that transforms the frogs and the Cinderellas in those fairy tales. The parable invites us to approach the throne of God's grace, ...to come before the one unto whom all hearts are open all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid.

Jesus the rejected one becomes the cornerstone on which we build our lives.

We celebrate that this morning in broken bread and wine outpoured. Christ with us and in us, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. Bread and wine into the sacrament of God's grace and presence, transforming our ordinary lives and sending us out to do extraordinary things.... to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God.

As we ponder that tendency to exclude ourselves from the Kingdom of God and the narrowness of heart that rejects the possibility of truth revealed in the unexpected, let us be on the lookout for the frogs and the cinderellas in our midst!