

PENTECOST 18A 04-10-2020

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Ps 19; Philippians 3. 4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

*(Jesus said) '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. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce.*

*But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?'*

*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.'*

*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"? 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. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*

Today's first reading from the book of Exodus is where the Ten Commandments come from, and the book goes on to expand these laws with many more laws about worship, how to treat slaves, punishment for violence, property laws and much more. This is the framework for Hebrew life and society, the base upon which Christianity builds.

I've heard people declare that if we all followed the Ten Commandments we wouldn't go wrong; we would all live good and decent lives and treat each other much better than we do. I'm not sure how true that is and find myself wondering if those who affirm this have ever actually read the commandments- and what Jesus had to say about them.

They are not called 'The Ten Commandments' in the scripture- that is a label given much later- because these first commandments given to Moses on the mountain are part of a whole structure. Anyway, the first of the ten is about the God of Israel's command that none of the other gods matter and they must follow only Yahweh.

Every community and society had its gods, and ancient people would not have contemplated denying their existence.

This commandment states, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me, or besides me." It was much later that the Hebrew people concluded that there WERE no other gods, Yahweh was the only God. Until then, they were unusual in worshipping only one God instead of many.

The second commandment, the prohibition against idol-worship, also made them unusual. All the surrounding countries had statues of their gods in their temples and people had their own household gods in their homes.

This was difficult for the Israelites and they lapsed time and again. There is a comfort in being able to look at the one you are praying to, and having the physical presence of a little statue in your home to take care of you. But God said- no, you cannot and must not make idols for yourselves. You must trust that I am with you.

Similarly, the third commandment prohibits the misuse of God's name, and observant Jewish people to this day do not say what is considered to be too holy to speak aloud.

The remaining commandments are about keeping the sabbath and honouring your parents, and the final five are things you must not do: commit murder, adultery or theft, lie or witness falsely, or jealously want someone else's property. Property included people- wives and slaves.

You may remember how Jesus answered when he was asked what he thought was the greatest commandment: he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Jesus is quoting from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, which expand greatly on the original laws of Moses. It seems the simplicity of Ten Commandments was never going to cover everything so the laws kept increasing, making it more difficult for people to keep them all.

Paul describes himself in his letter to the church at Philippi as a consummate Jew; born into the Hebrew faith and culture, zealous for the law which he scrupulously observed. But when he encountered Jesus all that accumulated righteousness fell away, until he could regard it as worthless rubbish, because knowing Jesus was so much more important- so much more everything.

When Jesus told the parable about the wicked tenants that we heard today, he was not talking to ordinary Jewish people. He was talking to the religious leaders in the Temple at Jerusalem- the chief priests and elders of the people.

They refused to believe he was from God, they questioned his authority, they were suspicious and resentful of his popularity with the ordinary people.

This parable is an allegory, in which every word and image stands for something else. So in this text God is the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the Old Testament are the slaves who came to collect what was due, Jesus is the son who finally came to collect and was killed, and the church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the parable.

The chief priests and the Pharisees knew this parable was directed at them and were more determined to arrest Jesus; as we know they did, eventually.

For centuries, scriptures like these were used by Christians to declare that Christianity had superseded Judaism, and sadly to stoke the fires of anti-Semitism. This is to misinterpret what both Paul and Jesus said and is an example of how those who commit horrors such as the Holocaust attempt to justify their actions. The idea of rejecting God is at the heart of this parable, and it is still happening today. Many people reject God by declaring that there is no God. They acknowledge the wonders of the universe but deny any obligation to its creator. We reject God when we reject the work of God as the One who created and sustains the universe.

Another way we can reject God is by rejecting some of God's people for our own reasons.

Human beings do terrible things to other people whom they are somehow able to define as less worthy, less human, or less valuable than themselves. If we can manage to turn another human being into the "other", we can do anything to them, and be as brutal as those who beat, stoned, and killed people in this story.

Can we say we are better than this in 2020, when so many are still suffering because they are poor, or black, or female, or gay, or disabled, or not cis-gendered?

Jesus is still waiting for us to love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves; and Jesus is alongside everyone who suffers because they are seen as 'other'. May we learn what it means to see with God's eyes, the eyes of love, as we look with wonder at one another- each made in God's image.

The Lord be with you.