

Holding Onto Power

It was about this time of year, 450 years ago, that a young woman was said to be sitting out in a park under an oak tree. This woman was 25, but had seen a difficult life. As heir to the throne at a highly volatile moment of English history, her life had been under threat. She had already been imprisoned in the tower of London, and now – with the apparent pregnancy of Queen Mary, she is in house arrest in Hatfield. On November 17th, 1558, news reached Elizabeth that her sister, Mary, was dead. And legend has it that Elizabeth quoted the same line that Jesus quotes in the parable of the tenants. It's probably not where most of us would turn for words of comfort if we had received news of a death in the family : 'it is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.'

I wonder if Elizabeth also had in mind the first half of that sentence, that the stone the builders have rejected, has become the chief cornerstone. It would certainly have been appropriate for her, as it was for Jesus.

Jesus was in the temple, and claiming to be its corner stone, the central foundation of the place where the heavens meet the earth. It may seem a bizarre mix of metaphors when this quotation from psalm 118 about stones is chosen to conclude the parable of a vineyard. But I suspect there is a word play at work here. The word for stone sounds very similar to the word for Son.

The parable we heard is about a vineyard, where the Son of the owner is rejected and killed by the tenants. It's not difficult to imagine tension between tenants and owners. The owners could sometimes get a better price for their share of the produce if they sold slightly early. The tenants were more interested in waiting for a fuller harvest before they could maximise their profits. And these kinds of tensions would probably have taken place from time to time. But clearly, as the reading from Isaiah confirms, the vineyard in the parable is Israel.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel has been described as a vineyard. Jesus is taking up Isaiah's theme of judgement to describe the events now taking place in Jerusalem. The Son has come to his vineyard, and those who reject him are worthy of judgement. But Jesus doesn't actually say this – he leaves it to those listening to say what the owner of the vineyard should do : 'he will bring those bad men to a bad end' ! Jesus simply says that the vineyard will be given to those who bear its fruit, that the Kingdom of God will be given to those who bear the fruit of the Kingdom.

That's not a very sensible thing to say when you're in the temple, in Jerusalem. Standing in the capital of the nation, in the beating heart of Israel, and saying – well, this place that is so precious to you is going to be taken from you and given to a nation that yields the proper fruit. It's bound to end in tears.

It's crude, it's barbaric, it's simplistic, but it works. Discipline. There are four children in my household, and discipline is a constant issue. And the practice of counting to three before administering justice is commonplace. And if you have introduced the practice properly, then you very rarely need to arrive at the number three before justice is served, judgement is averted. But this week, we are at the dinner table. 5 year old Stefan is refusing to eat his dinner. 'Have your next mouth full Stefan' (shakes head) One, two ... and in goes the broccoli – justice is served, enforcement unnecessary. However, Stefan's compliance has robbed his little sister of an amusing, and rather enjoyable spectacle. One, two, ... and as the broccoli

aeroplane is navigating its way through Stefan's jaws, Alice intervenes by shouting '3' and visiting upon Stefan her own heavy-handed form of justice, by her own authority.

Now throughout Israel's history, there had been many, many Jews who regarded themselves as God's favourites, and thought that the day of the Lord, or the coming Kingdom of God, would be the time when God comes to punish all those nasty foreigners – and of course, he would never dream of punishing us. This has always been a trap for the people of God, and is one that our churches today are falling into left, right and centre: how does the song go? "tell me the good old story – about who's not going to glory"

Those other people over there deserve to be judged, but not us. We pray and worship and live morally. Our faith is so strong you could eat your dinner off it! So Jesus does not seem interested in winning any friends, because this is not an open ended kind of parable. It doesn't seem to call for a response from the hearers. It is more of a prophetic act of judgement: you are going to lose your privileged place because you abused your privilege. The Kingdom of God is going to be taken from you and given to a nation that bears the fruit of it. When the heir to this kingdom came to you, you kicked him out. As a result – you are going to be kicked out of the vineyard. A generation later, the temple lay in ruins.

Application: holding on to power!

Was it Winston Churchill who said history repeats itself because people won't listen to it! Jesus is not standing before us today, passing final judgement on the church. But the warning of this parable echoes through history to issue something of a challenge to us. The basic dynamic is similar to the film version of Lord of the Rings. Lord Denethor is the steward of the realm of Gondor, he is the nation's leader, caretaker awaiting the arrival of the true King. But when news that Aragorn, the heir to the throne is approaching, Lord Denethor declares "Gondor is mine." He will not relinquish his power. And the question the parable leaves us is perhaps whether we make room for the Kingship of God, for the justice of God's reign, for the disruptive presence of the Son. Or whether we simply want to cling to the power we have.

I think the same challenge comes to us in our political life, in our church life, in our most personal life.

If you were to describe our international economic systems as a vineyard, it might look something like this: That the vineyard's tenants are our banking systems. Maximising their profits without being accountable to anyone from outside the vineyard. Time after time, the demand comes for them to share the fruits of their work with those who own the vineyard – the common people whose money is locked up in those banks. But time after time the call is rejected, and the lion's share of the profit stays with the bankers themselves – instead of to the people whose money is locked up in the vineyard. In the end, the tension between the tenants – who are now growing wealthy, and the people whose money they are playing with, hits crisis point. (The point at which the vineyard owner sends his son.)

As someone who knows next to nothing about economics, I wonder whether – with the hundreds of billions of pounds of real money, taken from tax payers and injected into a system that is as doomed as the temple of Jesus' day, is simply the desperate climax of tenants doing what they have been doing all along! Doggedly holding onto their power at the expense of hardship for the true owners of the vineyard.

The temptation to hold on to power can be seen in our church life. If someone comes along clearly more gifted than I am at leading worship, how ready am I to make room for them if I have come to enjoy leading worship? How ready am I to let go of that little bit of power? One of the glorious examples of humility that I've seen much of over the last couple of years is that of small churches, reducing in number and struggling to keep going – looking around and linking up with local churches in a similar situation to become a single fellowship. Can you imagine – two church secretaries! Two treasurers! Two diaconates! There are places where the churches say they will die before they have anything to do with the Baptist chapel half a mile up the road. And that's what happened. But an infusion of new life in a fellowship of churches that embody a rugged humility and readiness to let go of power for the sake of the Gospel.

The struggle to let go of power is something we can see embodied at the most personal level as well. One of my favourite sentences of all time comes from a television advert for a cream, 'clinically proven do reduce the seven signs of ageing'. I'm not sure what those seven signs of ageing are, but the fact that they exist as a timeless scientific absolute seems beyond all doubt. I suppose we might infer from scripture that wisdom, for many, is a sign of ageing. But here is a cream clinically proven to reduce it! The seven signs of ageing? And I guess that the eighth sign of ageing must be death!

But what is it that leaves us so afraid of ageing, of death? Why is it that carbon freezing your body when you die is such big business, freezing your corpse for some glorious technicoloured future when scientists will have discovered how to resurrect you in the name of technological progress? What is it that prevents us from taking death seriously? Could it be that if we held ourselves to be the stewards, the tenants of our own life rather than the lords of our own lives, that we might be liberated somewhat from the fear of death? Nice theory maybe.

Yesterday afternoon in southern France, was the funeral of a 36 year old man who died of cancer on Wednesday night, leaving a wife and twin boys aged under two. And the boys knew well enough what had happened, and had expressed their grief emotionally. But as they threw flowers upon their father's coffin at the graveside, they spontaneously burst into a round of applause, full of smiles. I couldn't help but think that this seems to be one way in which God declares "well done, good and faithful servant".

Communion

We are about to celebrate Holy communion. A little baptism, as we fellowship this Jesus in his death and resurrection. A reminder that we are not Lord of our lives, when we address him as Lord. Tenants, perhaps stewards, seeking to make room for him in every dimension of our being. The temptation to hold on to power, to maximise our self potential, to fix our own lives will always be with us.

But at communion we see the Jesus as the crucified Lord, the murdered son of the vineyard owner, despised, rejected and killed. But in his resurrection, we see him vindicated. The Son the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Amen."

In the silence we think today especially of those who are hungry and thirsty because of the global economic situation. For everyone who does not know where their next meal will come from, we pray for daily bread. For those with the power to make a difference to the way that our earth's resources are shared, we pray for the courage to act justly. May they be good tenants of this vineyard. For all who are hungry at the moment,

May your Kingdom come

May your will be done.

We have been bombarded with graphic images, and the emotive effects of those media that immunise us from true concern of the world beyond the boundaries of our vineyard –

Into the lives of the wealthy complacent:

May your Kingdom come

May your will be done.

We have felt the challenge to live out our Christian lives in this place, tenants of your vineyard, stewards of all the good gifts with which you have blessed us. As we seek to order our priorities according to your holy Word,

May your Kingdom come

May your will be done.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God to endless ages, May your love so fill our hearts that we are not only uplifted, but transformed. May your word so fill our thoughts that we are not only enlightened, but changed. May your compassion so fill our lives, that we are not only stirred, but stirred to action. Lord God, May your kingdom come in and through our lives, bearing fruit in season, fruit that will last.