



## Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church October 5, 2014

### Matthew 21: 33-46

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*While on holidays, Carmen and I went to another church and heard a different preacher. He was in the process of a preaching series going through Corinthians and was up to the second half of chapter 7, where Paul is expressing his opinion about the preference for people to remain single if they can, to be available and free for God's ministry. I was expecting either a sermon on how this section is a product of the early church's belief that Christ was returning soon, and so marriage and children weren't so important, or, some sort of condemnation of the Catholic position on celibacy which this passage informs. Instead, he presented a contemporary take on discerning God's call and whether there is a ministry for you as a single person rather than giving in to the culture of weddings and coupling. Instead of exegesis we were presented with an application of scripture here and now. A sermon based in the belief that scripture is the living word of God, not just a set of writings from the past.*

This idea of the living word was top of my mind when I looked at today's section from Matthew. This parable has a number of problems; it contains a harsh image of God that sounds strange in the lips of Jesus, it is too easy to use as a proof text to condemn the Jews and, other than some sort of biblical catechism on salvation history, it doesn't seem to make sense as to why it's in scripture at all. But, what if we look at the cyclic nature of the parable; in the beginning the landowner lets out his vineyard to a group of tenants and at the end he lets out the vineyard to another group of tenants; will the same thing happen again? Instead of reading this parable as a comforting story of the church replacing Israel in the kingdom, it becomes a disconcerting warning to the church that has Jesus looking straight at us and saying, "The vineyard belongs to God, what are you doing to bring in the harvest, remember what happened to the previous tenants".

Most of the commentaries that I consulted for this text had the same take in locating this parable either in the context of Jesus confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders or, Matthew's context of starting a new community and a new church separate from the synagogue. There were warnings in the commentaries to not make the story about the Jews as a whole, appreciating that Matthew himself was Jewish, as was, presumably, a large proportion of his community. This is not a parable addressed to the crowds, it is spoken to the religious leaders who had confronted Jesus in the temple and questioned

his authority; and indeed the leaders recognise that Jesus is aiming this parable at them. And the commentaries noted that it is those religious leaders and not Jesus, who picture the owner of the vineyard, God, as a harsh authoritarian who puts the tenants to death, Jesus doesn't agree with that image of God, just that God will take the kingdom away from the religious leaders of Israel. Other commentaries pointed the themes and concepts of this parable all coming from the history and scripture of Israel, so the hearers would have known what Jesus was talking about; the vineyard is a common image in the prophets. However all of that is still comment on a parable located and fixed in the first century. Is this really just a story to make the early church feel satisfied that they were now the people of the kingdom? A little smugness that God is now on their side? No.

One commentary opened up the idea of the parable being applicable and relevant now. Matthew was writing to his community in a tone of warning and not congratulation. Our ancestors didn't produce the fruits of God's vineyard; they ignored and killed the prophets and even ignored and killed the Son of God so they could run the vineyard their way; don't let us make the same mistakes. This is a parable directly aimed at the church, particularly, and I say this somewhat uncomfortably, aimed at the leaders of the church – hear the call of the prophets, recognise the Son of God and produce the fruits of the kingdom. We are the ones called to hear the prophets and respect the son. This is a parable that speaks to every generation – the kingdom is God's vineyard and we are expected to produce a crop of the fruits of the kingdom – justice, mercy, peace, love and faith.

The history of the church is full of examples where the church forgot this parable and went after other "fruit"; power, authority, judgement or simply social position. These are distortions that come from either ignoring the call of the prophets to justice and mercy over religious practice, or from ignoring the Son as the image of God – forgiving, inclusive, strong but humble service and willing sacrifice even to the point of death. Not real stoning and killing of the prophets as in the parable, and not really killing the Son as in the parable, but certainly metaphorically killing them, ignoring and silencing the uncomfortable messages of forgiving as we were forgiven, accepting as we were accepted, denouncing judgement and denouncing wealth, and giving generously as we have been generously blessed.

On the other hand, there have been periods of the church's history when it forgot about producing fruit at all; and that is one of the traps that the church is in at the moment. The church community can become so inward looking and interested only in the needs and wants of the community, that the fruit of the kingdom becomes an unknown concept. And this is not just about mission focus and meeting needs, it is about attitudes and open welcome and hospitality.

Some of the epistles give us lists of the “fruits of the Spirit”, and they are not a long way from what Jesus is talking about – love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. However, you can do all that and still miss the essence of the message of the prophets – justice and mercy and humbly walking with God. The epistles can be read as simply the way to live in a Christian community; the call of the prophets is about how we are to live within the whole community.

*“The word of the Lord is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.”* We cannot just leave scripture as stories from the past with only some moral application now; the word of God is living and active and relevant. Jesus and Matthew spoke to their communities, but the word carries on speaking, and here we are presented with the call to realise that the church we are part of, and the faith that we profess, are expressions of God’s kingdom and we are temporary tenants - stewards - who owe God the produce of the kingdom – justice, mercy, peace, faith and humble service.