

A parable was once described to me as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning because with the one anomaly where the parable speaks about the earthly world as it actually is, which Revd Jon lead us through last week, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning is a fair and accurate summary of all the parables we have considered thus far in our sermon series. Today's is no exception.

Luke sets this parable in the final week of Jesus' life, shortly after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is notable not only for being the final parable in Luke's gospel but also for being significantly different to other parables because for once its meaning is unambiguous. We know this because Luke tells us that the audience exclaim "may this never be" or as it is put in other translations 'God forbid such a situation should ever arise'.

Clearly, they understood the analogy of the landowner and tenants in their earthly world.

This is not surprising because tenants farming lands on behalf of absentee landlords was a widespread practice not only in 1st century Judea but also throughout the Roman Empire. Rent payments were made not in money but in kind with a tenant, delivering to the landlord an agreed share of the harvest, which was fine whenever the harvest was good or plentiful, but potentially disastrous for the tenant if the harvest failed or things had gone wrong, because the debt still had to be paid.

So, the audience would have understood that God was to be seen in the character of the landowner who had planted the vineyard. The vineyard represented the nation of Israel whilst the tenants were the teachers of the law and religious leaders of the day. The servants sent by God would be recognised as the prophets and priests God had sent to Israel over the centuries. The son of course is Jesus and when Jesus speaks about the others, he is referring to the gentiles, including us today.

The general audience may have been dismayed by what they heard; but the priests were furious because Jesus gives the answer to their earlier and often repeated question as to where his authority came from. Jesus is saying that God has sent him as the rightful heir to the prophets of old not only to reveal the teaching of the priests is wrong but also that he is the way, the truth and the life and no one gains access to God's Kingdom except through him.

But more than that, it showed that Jesus knew of their plan to kill him. Little wonder then that Luke not only tells us they knew Jesus had spoken the parable against them but also ends by confirming they were looking for a way to arrest him, as indeed they do just a few days later.

But the heavenly meaning of the parable was perhaps not so immediately obvious. For example, God, characterised as the owner of the vineyard shows incredible patience. He continues to send servants time and again in the hope that the tenants might do the right thing.

We are only told of three occasions in the passage, but believe you me, after spending 40 years in the residential letting market, human landlords are not noted for their patience. Indeed, I've received calls on hundreds of occasions from landlords demanding action against the tenant for non-payment of rent which is less than a week overdue.

Yet as we know from the Old Testament, God gave the wayward Israelites chance after chance to do the right thing. He sent Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elijah, Elisha and in Jesus' day John

the Baptist to name but a few in the hope that His people would respond to the prophets call to repentance. No wonder we say patience is a virtue and is an essential fruit of the Spirit.

The parable also highlights the propensity of humankind to act unscrupulously to better themselves. We are told that after the servants were unsuccessful the owner decided to send his own son in the belief that the tenants would show respect and treat him as the one who owned the land.

Instead, they conspire together and kill him in order to claim outright ownership. The audience of the day would have understood the motive behind this action because Jewish land laws stated that if a landowner died without an heir, the land would be passed to those who currently lived on it.

I don't have time to go into the details, but such unscrupulousness still goes on today. A few years ago, something kept nagging at me over the conduct of one tenant I had found for an overseas landlord. There was something about the tenant which just wasn't right, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Although full and satisfactory references had been received from the tenant's bank, solicitor, and employer I shared my doubts with the owner who eventually decided the tenancy should go ahead. And although the rent was paid direct to the landlord for the first couple of months, my attempts to either see or speak to the tenant on maintenance matters were rebuffed one way or another. Despite what I said earlier, the landlord was very patient even after the rent stopped being paid, and something kept nagging at me.

Long story, cut short, falling back on my police training I uncovered the fact that the whole tenancy was a scam. Even worse, the so-called tenant had posed as the real owner and sold the house to another scammer who had taken out a £500,000 mortgage and the two of them had not only disappeared overseas with the proceeds but also an additional £12 million from other identical scams.

But, just as in our parable, eventually the tenant got his comeuppance in the form of a 10-year prison sentence. And Jesus tells in no uncertain terms that whilst wickedness may prevail in the short term, ultimately it cannot and will not escape punishment in the end.

A couple of days earlier Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem as the people shouted out verse 26 from psalm 118: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". Now he quotes back at the audience verse 21 from the same psalm "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone". Jesus's arrest, death, and resurrection just a few days later will become and remains the cornerstone on which the Church is built and of which we are a part of today.

But the story does not end there; this is a parable which is about you and me. We are today's tenant farmers living in the vineyard that God created and planted out for us. All he wants is for us to be good stewards of all that He has given us. To care for his world. To care for his people, our neighbours. To worship and love him with all our heart, soul, mind and body.

He continues to send his servants in many different guises. Sometimes they are rejected, at other times they are accepted, often unnoticed - in our family, our friendships, our workplaces and sometimes even in churches! They have guided us towards the understanding that God is love, they have mentored us as we learn to live loved. There's one important difference though

between us and the tenants in the parable. We accept and understand that in our weakness Christ alone will make us strong, because he is our cornerstone.

In fact, let's sing that very truth.

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 14 Aug 2022