

I've been struggling with this passage. What's it about? Kingdom values? The consequences of sin? Or God's justice when we have been wrongly treated? I've realised that I much prefer to talk about God's love, kindness and mercy. But in any reading about Jesus surely love must be there. Yes, but here I think it's tough love! Truths we find unpalatable. I'd rather focus on the benefits of following Jesus than the cost. But of course there are always both.

Those of us who have the privilege of being parents and grandparents know tough love is necessary! Our grandchildren came to stay before term started. The 3 year old came into the kitchen with a cheeky look on her face and tell tale brown smudges around her mouth. "What have you been doing?" "We found some chocolate!" My daughter, naturally concerned they have a healthy diet, limits sweet treats, and swiftly took action. The rest of the chocolate removed and no ice cream at tea time. All our choices have consequences! A good thing to learn early in life.

Let's dive into the parable (I can't avoid it any longer!)

It seems as if, the parable of the wicked tenants is primarily directed towards religious leaders. Ah ha! Perhaps it's aimed at Jon and Terry and the rest of us are off the hook! Phew! If only! There is an urgency to Jesus' teaching here, no messing around, he knows time is running out.

The parable seems to represent the situation in Israel at that time. The landowner, who planted the vineyard, is God the Father. The vineyard is Israel. The tenants are the religious leaders, who have been trusted by God and given freedom to run things. But they stop following God's ways. So afraid of losing their position of power, that they decide to take the power for themselves. The servants, sent to collect the fruit for the vineyard owner, are the succession of prophets who God has sent to the nation of Israel over the centuries. Last of all the vineyard owners son is Jesus, "surely they will respect him?" But no the son is cruelly betrayed and rejected. The tenants think that by getting rid of the son, they have won and everything will be theirs. But God will not be mocked.

As the chequered history of Israel shows, the majority of its leaders were disloyal to God, they did reject his prophets and they killed his son. The religious leaders thought they were in charge and knew best. They disregarded God's kindness.

However justice is fundamental to God's character. Those who continually reject God will not fare well. As the parable says the vineyard will be given to new tenants. The privileged place God offered Israel will then be given to a new people composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

But Jesus doesn't stop there, he quotes scripture to emphasise his message!

"The stone the builders rejected
Has become the cornerstone;
The Lord has done this,
And it is marvellous in our eyes".

It's Psalm 118 that's quoted here. As we know the book of psalms was the equivalent of the Jewish prayer/ hymn book. Psalm 118 was very well known as a festival hymn. The people had sung it just a couple of days before when they welcomed Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

By quoting this Psalm Jesus is letting anyone know who is open to hear it that He is God's true Son, the Messiah. As in English the letters for son SON are present in the word stone, so they are in Hebrew. The Hebrew for stone is eben and for son is ben. The son who is rejected and betrayed becomes cornerstone or capstone. This stone at the top of adjacent walls is essential for holding the walls together. Without the cornerstone everything falls apart.

This quote reverses the theme of the parable. The Jews may reject Jesus but God will fully vindicate Him. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that God has done this. And what marvellous consequences it has for all of us who believe!

What is true of Jesus is true of us. This is where the cost and the tough love come in. As Jesus is betrayed, abused and rejected so might we be. The suffering we go through and all we see around us can't be ignored. Whatever we have been through, I believe, this reading tells us that God sees all that happens to us. He is a faithful, loving Father and in His own way, in His own time, He will right all wrongs and we will receive justice.

Suffering is awful but it can also be transformative. But there is a very real enemy at work in the world who will do anything to prevent us turning to Christ and living for Him, seeking his mercy, thereby extending His Kingdom.

The good news is that Jesus, the cornerstone, will always remain secure. The building will remain standing and not fall.

Whatever happens God is sovereign, His kingdom values are the ones that count. He will be victorious and His people with Him.