

## **Mark 12:1-12 Parable of the tenants**

*12 Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. <sup>2</sup> At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. <sup>3</sup> But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. <sup>4</sup> Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. <sup>5</sup> He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. <sup>6</sup> 'He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son." <sup>7</sup> 'But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." <sup>8</sup> So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. <sup>9</sup> 'What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. <sup>10</sup> Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; <sup>11</sup> the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?' <sup>12</sup> Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.*

Last week Jesus was in the Temple and being questioned by the chief priests and teachers of the law and elders. It was probably Tuesday before the crucifixion. They were seeking as we have seen throughout the ministry of Jesus to trap him into saying something that they could use against him because he threatened their authority and their position in society. Every time they did this, he managed to turn the tables on them and expose their ignorance of the Law, their preference for man made customs that made complying with the Law of Moses more onerous, and their fear of what the people - who drew their own conclusions as to who Jesus might be - might do to them if they attacked Jesus

After his encounter with the Temple worthies, Jesus begins teach the people in the Temple courts. You'll remember the crowds are gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, with crowds of people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah able to establish a new Jewish kingdom free from Roman rule. The fact that he outwitted the Temple officials who were supposed to have all the answers, performed miracles and healings was something the people found immensely attractive.

This parable is one of the clearest for the Jews who heard it. What they didn't realise was its prophetic nature, but then the prophets of old always warned that God was a God of justice who would destroy the unrighteous. The references to the Old Testament run through the parable, and this time Jesus doesn't have to explain himself to his disciples who previously we have seen were often unaware of what Jesus was doing or saying. Mark doesn't explain the meaning, but says the meaning was clear enough. But is it clear enough for us, perhaps not as well versed in the Old Testament?

The man who planted the vineyard is God. The vineyard is Israel – a land of milk and honey given by God to the Israelites. The vines are the people of Israel. The tenants are the leaders of Israel. The wall is the protection God gave Israel throughout the centuries when they obeyed Him. The winepress and pit is the place where the harvest is stored. The tower is where the people of Israel could live in safety. The servants sent to collect the rightful share of the harvest are the prophets and righteous men of God who warned the people that they were straying from God's ways. The multitude of servants of God indicates the patience God has for Israel even when it sins against Him. The son is Jesus, the Messiah – soon to be killed. The result is that God gave the vineyard to the Gentiles and destroyed most of the Jewish people left in Israel during the revolt from AD 66 to AD 70 when Jerusalem was reduced to rubble by Titus.

### **The vineyard – Isaiah 5:1-7**

## **Mark 12:1-12 Parable of the tenants**

*5 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. 2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. 3 'Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?' 5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. 6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.' 7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

### **The servants – meaning the prophets.**

*Joshua 14:7 I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land.*

*Amos 3:7 Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.*

*Jeremiah 7:25 From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets.*

*Zechariah 1:2-6 The LORD was very angry with your ancestors. 3 Therefore tell the people: this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Return to me," declares the LORD Almighty, "and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. 4 Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices." But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. 5 Where are your ancestors now? And the prophets, do they live for ever? 6 But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors?*

Jesus is telling the people that God is generous... giving the Israelites a land able to give good grapes and a good harvest, a land where they will be protected by God because of the wall around the vineyard. God has provided for all their needs in the land He has given them.

Jesus is telling the people that God places trust in His servants, the spiritual leaders of the people to remind them of what is due to Him – their worship, their obedience, their tithes and sacrifices, and their love. He trusts these men of God to tell the people what is owed to God regardless of the consequences.

Jesus is telling the people that God is patient. He will not judge as soon as the people make mistakes or turn away from Him to chase after other Gods or follow man made rules He didn't ask them to follow. God has for the 1700 years from Abraham to Jesus been patient with the Israelites. The Maccabees restored Israel's sovereignty but lost it a hundred years later, so it was fresh in the minds of the people that God was able to restore the land to His people. It happened in living memory.

Jesus is telling the people that God is a God of justice, despite having been merciful for so many years. There will be punishment for the wicked and those who reject God's ways and disobey His commandments. That is mentioned many times in the Bible, and the people in Jesus's day were well aware of this. They wanted to please God by being obedient, but obedience by not doing the

## Mark 12:1-12 Parable of the tenants

things God commands us not to do, is not the same as loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself so that you do the things that God wants us to do.

What does the parable say about mankind and the spiritual leaders of Israel?

The tenants in the vineyard knew the owner (God) was far away and so felt that He was not able to harm them whatever they did to the servants coming to receive what was due to the owner of the vineyard. We know that Jesus is close to us, but is invisible and so can be felt as far away and not watching all we do, hearing all we say, knowing all we think. We are all sinners: no one is perfect. We can all repent and be forgiven, because Jesus is merciful and out of His love for us is ready, willing and able to forgive. It's perhaps easy to believe that because of this we can keep on sinning because we can keep being forgiven. That was no different 2000 years ago. All you had to do was keep on sacrificing and going to the priests to pay the price for cancelling your sins.

The Pharisees were very conscious of sin, and the need to avoid it. They genuinely wanted to lead lives honouring to God and be righteous. Their weakness was pride and self righteousness, so that their obedience to the form of religion led Jesus to echo what Isaiah (29:13) said about those who honoured God with their lips while their hearts were elsewhere. It seems the chief priests and the teachers of the Law outwardly obeyed the Law but inwardly just wanted power over others, position and respect for their authority. They were willing, over and over throughout the past 1200 years, to mock, threaten, and even kill prophets whenever their personal positions were questioned.

When Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23 *"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; <sup>23</sup> the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"* the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the elders in the Temple, all recognised that Jesus was speaking about them. In Matthew's slightly longer version of this parable it ends (Matt 21:43-46)

<sup>43</sup> *'Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.'*

<sup>45</sup> *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet*

Here it is made even plainer that the vineyard is the kingdom of God, and that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus was speaking about their power which would be taken from them. This came to pass when the Temple was destroyed in AD 70.

When men who see God as far away and unable to touch them, when men can abuse their privileged status as a chosen people, then God can take that status away and give it to others. Jesus is prophesying that the Jews will lose the inheritance God gave them and give it to the Gentiles. Jesus at the same time prophesies his death as the Son in the parable, and because of God's justice, he will be victorious.

Going on to some points to take home with you which are: (1) **If this story happened today, what would it look like?** (2) **What is this story saying to us today?** (3) **Could the story make a difference to my life? If so, how?**

We used to live in a Christian nation, where the fear of God – fear in the sense of awe rather than being afraid – prevailed among the people. When St Augustine came to Kent, 1400 years ago, the

## Mark 12:1-12 Parable of the tenants

people accepted the Gospel and within a hundred years, this was a Christian country. Sadly the Church repeated the errors of the Israelites and its leaders became more interested in power over the people than loving God. Then came the Reformation to sweep away the secular power of the Church. A hundred years later in the seventeenth century the Puritans got a bad press because of Cromwell and the Royalists writing the history books, but many were seeking to create a land blessed by God because the people worshipped and honoured God in the same way Israel in its better days obeyed and worshipped God. The great revivals in the eighteenth century under Whitfield and Wesley transformed the nation. Today most people have turned their backs on God and many believe He doesn't see what they are doing because He forms no part of their lives. Billy Graham came to Britain in the 1950s to 1980s. Millions heard him preach and many gave their lives to Jesus. The message is still as good as it always was and has the same capacity to change lives. The servants of God are still preaching Good News, but increasingly they are being mocked, ignored, despised and told that their message is unacceptable at best, offensive and insensitive or even plain evil at worst by people who have no fear of God.

What this story tells us today is that God is a God of justice who is patient, merciful, forgiving and above all loving. But in the end there is judgment and it is unavoidable.

Could this parable make a difference in my life? Jesus reveals the nature of God. God is generous; God is able to trust us to make choices; God is patient; God is merciful; God is forgiving; God is love.

Let me finish with a passage from Romans 10:9-21 <sup>9</sup> *if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* <sup>10</sup> *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.* <sup>11</sup> *As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.'* <sup>[Isaiah 26:16]</sup> <sup>12</sup> *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,* <sup>13</sup> *for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'* <sup>[Joel 2:32]</sup> <sup>14</sup> *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* <sup>15</sup> *And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'* <sup>[Isaiah 52:7]</sup> <sup>16</sup> *But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'* <sup>[Isaiah 53:1]</sup> <sup>17</sup> *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* <sup>18</sup> *But I ask: did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.'* <sup>[Psalm 19:4]</sup> <sup>19</sup> *Again I ask: did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, 'I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.'* <sup>[Deut 32:21]</sup> <sup>20</sup> *And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.'* <sup>[Isaiah 65:1]</sup> <sup>21</sup> *But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'* <sup>[Isaiah 65:2]</sup>

These words of Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit apply to our nation today as they did to Israel 2000 years ago. That is the wonder of the Word of God: it endures and applies to our circumstances as much as it did when first uttered.

Let's pray