

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY OCTOBER 8th

Reading: Matthew 21: 33 - 46 [Pentecost 18]

The contest between Jesus and his opponents continues! This is its second instalment in Matthew. We have shifted these encounters chronologically in telling the story so that they appear for us in Holy Week as part of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is the day after Palm Sunday in the narrative and Jesus is at the Temple for what will be for him the last occasion.

We need recall at the outset that Matthew writes for a community who are in a fight with the synagogue leaders. Back in Jerusalem, there is no Temple as the central focus of worship any longer. It may have been of some reassurance to those who received this Gospel to be told in such a blunt story that the "vineyard" had been unlawfully seized and that when the owner sought to collect his 'fruit', the messengers were rejected, then killed. Leave aside that this is cryptic reference to events in Jerusalem some time ago. As Eugene Boring in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary states, "*Matthew understands this as the destruction of Jerusalem and the growth of the church of Jews and Gentiles in unbelieving Israel's place*" [Commentary on page 414]. The parable therefore is of an historical development, long after Jesus has lived and died, yet supposedly upon his lips! We might note that Matthew has no need to implicate the Romans in his story; they have no role in whatever the writer expects to happen now.

The Parable of the Vineyard taken away and given to others is clearly related to the situation of its time and should be used for universal 'truths' only with great caution. The issue of tensions between synagogue and church, traditional faith and new faith and the development of a new community was integral in the early faith communities for whom the Gospel story was recorded. That this parable is strongly allegorical is suggestive of early church application and use, rather than the subtle cultural story-telling authentic to Jesus [refer "Looking Ahead" July 13]. This is a heavy-handed, contemporary swipe at enemies the unhinged transcription of which into contemporary context has been the source of some of the 20th century's worst historical abuses of anti-Semitism and castigation of modern Judaism.

We noted last week from Bill Loader's "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passage from the Lectionary" notes that this and the following further two parables of the Vineyard workers rejecting the owner [21: 33 – 46] and the great supper [22: 1 – 14] each address, in turn, the people's response to John, their response to Jesus and finally, to the disciples and their mission. Loader notes the Matthean glosses on the parable compared to its equivalent in Mark: servants (plural) are sent as the first accountability. Loader suggests that this maybe reference to the Law and the Prophets. Further, Loader notes, "*Mark says he (the son) was killed and then thrown out of the vineyard. Matthew reverses this order to make it match Jesus' execution outside the city*". The allegorical application of elements of the story to characters in Matthew's community and their experience is extended and deliberate (and not in accord with how I have argued previously that parables are told and used).

Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh write as scholars of the time in their "Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels" that the story may have existed as "*a warning to landowners as expropriating and exporting the produce of the land*" [page 133].

These clashed between early Christian and existing synagogue communities are not our concerns. Like last week's reading, it takes some delving to salvage thought that is relevant and helpful to our day and contact. Perhaps the reminder is that God calls in the harvest, that the 'fruits' of the Kingdom belong to no group or person who might claim them. There are no exclusive rights. All that the Kingdom has to offer is God's to give and God will give it as and when God wills. The Kingdom cannot be subject to human

control. Jesus came to make that Kingdom known but was refused by some who had convinced themselves that they already knew how, where and when God would act.