

Mk 12:1-12 *The Cornerstone*
Tim Anderson 6/8/23

In country Australia,
the days are gone when every farmer owned a relatively small acreage
and tilled their own land.

These days, especially in the beef industry,
wealthy landowners buy up lots of farms
and put in professional managers to run them.

The Australian Agricultural Company owns 6 million hectares
or 1% of Australia.

It's been going since 1824.

It's actually the oldest continuing company in Australia.

You might have thought farmers buying up lots of properties
was a new thing.

It might not be as new as it seems.

In Jesus' day,
there were wealthy landholders
who had bought up many of the vineyards
and put managers in to run them.

Buy a vineyard,
get it all set up,
and then employ someone to manage it for you,
while you go about your business.

And that part of life in Israel
is reflected in the story Jesus told in today's reading.

Maybe there had even been a notorious incident
where the tenant had tried to keep profits from the farm,
and deprive the owner of his share,
and Jesus was reflecting a known story in the parable.

We don't know.

What is very clear,
is what Jesus is telling his hearers.

There's no question as to what the imagery here refers to.

Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah.

Is 5:1-2 "I will sing for the one I love

a song about his vineyard:

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watch tower on it
and cut out a winepress as well."

Notice how Jesus is copying the details of Isaiah's story
right down to the watch tower and the winepress,
so his hearers can't miss the parallel.

In Isaiah's story,

God is the owner of the vineyard
and the nation of Israel is the vineyard.

And the love and attention that the owner spends on the vineyard
represents the love and attention that God had poured out to his people.

Listen to how Isaiah continues.

Is 5:3-7 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

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?

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.

I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briars and thorns will grow there.

I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel,

and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice,
but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but heard cries of distress.

The story the Isaiah is telling is of God
feeling like he has lavished his care and attention on Israel
and he is so disgusted with their behaviour
that he is ready for Israel to be destroyed.

That's the story that would spring to mind
when Jesus' hearers listen to him begin talking about vineyards.
And if the vineyard is Israel and the owner is God in Isaiah's story,
it doesn't take much of a leap of imagination to work out
that the farmers running the vineyard in the absence of the owner
in Jesus' story
are the leaders of Israel.

As in Isaiah's story,
the fruit that God was looking to collect from his people,
were the fruit of justice and righteousness.
And the servants he sent to collect those fruit were the prophets.
The job of the prophets was to call the nation
to turn away from ignoring and rejecting God's word
to living obediently and producing the fruit God desired.
And how had the prophets been treated?

Pretty shamefully!
King Ahab tried to murder Elijah.
Jeremiah got thrown down a well.
In Matthew and Luke,
Jesus reminds them of the prophet Zechariah
who was murdered in the temple.

So Jesus has taken Isaiah's imagery of the nation

and he's added two extra characters,
the leaders of the nation – tenants in the story
and prophets of the people – the servants of the master in the story
And Jesus' accusation is this.

God sent prophets to call you to justice and righteousness –
but you people –
remember Jesus is talking to the leaders of Israel –
you people wouldn't listen.
Instead you abused the messengers God sent to you.

But Jesus does more than give them a perspective on what has happened.
He also tells them about what is going to happen.
The owner of the vineyard sent his son whom he loved –
and the tenants killed him.

In other words,
Jesus came to earth not out of the blue
but as the last of God's series of messengers to his people.
Like the prophets before him,
he came to call Israel to justice and obedience.
Like the prophets before him,
he was treated shamefully.
But unlike the prophets before him,
Jesus is not just another messenger –
he is the Son that God loves.
Jesus is the last opportunity the people of Israel have
to get things right with God.
God has sent prophet after prophet.
But after Jesus there's no more.
That's it.

There are so many parallels between how God deals with his people
and how parents have to deal with children.
So often we find ourselves sending multiple messages –
“Do this or there will be consequences.”

The messages get ignored.
Then there's one last message.
"OK this is a final warning.
Do it,
or face the music."
And if it doesn't get done,
you have to hand out the punishment.

And similarly here,
Jesus story doesn't finish
with what has been going on between the prophets and Israel
and then with him and Israel.
He finishes with God's attitude to the whole matter.
If verses 1-8 are a picture of Israel's history up to and including the
coming of Jesus,
verse 9 is what God is going to do about it.
The prophets have been warnings.
Jesus is the last final warning –
there will be no more.
"What will the owner of the vineyard do?
He will come back, kill those tenants
and give the vineyard to others."
What does Jesus mean by that?
First of all, the leaders of Israel will face punishment from God
for their frequent ignoring of the messengers he sent them.
That punishment will be severe
or Jesus wouldn't have used the imagery of death.
Secondly the job of being God's people on earth –
because that is what it means to be Israel,
to be God's people on earth –
that job will be taken away from the Jews
and given to other people who will produce the fruit God requires.
Instead of the Jewish people having the privilege and responsibility
of being a living example of what it means to be the people of God,

that responsibility passes to the Christian church.
We have been given the vineyard.

I want to spell out some consequences of that for us.
The first consequence regards how we view the Jewish people today.
Many Christian people today are confused.
They think that there are two ways to relate to God.
The old way of being a Jew which works if you are born a Jew
and the new way of being a Christian which works for everyone else.
But let's be clear about what Jesus is teaching here.
The Jews are no longer the people of God.
If Jewish people want to relate to God today,
they do it on the same basis as everyone else –
they become part of the church of Jesus Christ.
Living in relationship with God by being a faithful Jew,
obeying the law of Moses,
sacrificing at the temple,
keeping the food laws,
these things were possible up until the coming of Jesus.
The vineyard has now been given to others.

So when we hear news reports of fighting in Israel –
a war in Lebanon,
or tension between Israel and Hamas,
of course we should be praying for peace,
as we would pray for peace anywhere in the world,
but there's no special significance to that land as there once was.
The path to relationship with God now
is only through Jesus.
The path of living in the promised land is a thing of the past.

Well that's the specific meaning of the parable Jesus told.
That God has taken the privilege of being his people away from the Jews
and given it to those who put their faith in Jesus.

The Jews of today are not God's chosen people.

We are.

The people who receive the master's son
are those to whom he gives the vineyard.

But we can also generalise

about how God acts in bringing salvation to the world.

It's not only Jews

who can be unfaithful to the privilege of being known as God's people –
churches can too.

Churches can give up on the good news of Jesus.

I heard a prominent Christian teacher describe it like this:

The first generation hears the good news of the gospel of Jesus.

They understand that his death on the cross is the amazing plan of God
to pay the price for the sins of the world.

The understanding that Christ has made them pure in God's eyes
has a radical effect on their lives.

Their attitude to a whole range of ethical and moral issues shifts
as they seek to live out their Christian faith in an authentic way.

The second generation hear about Jesus and the cross from their parents.

They know it all their lives –

in their worldview its part of the furniture.

They don't have the same feeling about how astonishingly good news it is.

And so their passion shifts from the cross

where their parents' passion was,

to the moral and ethical implications of the Christian faith.

That's where their heart truly lies.

In the third generation,

the gospel and the cross aren't even talked about at home.

The children of this second generation of Christians

absorb the moral and ethical principles their parents are passionate about.

But when they grow up,

they wonder why on earth the religious bit is necessary.

"We can live good upright lives

without needing some religious justification,” they say.
And so they either leave the church,
or the churches they are part of give up on the gospel.

The message of this parable to the church is this.

If the church –

a particular congregation or a denomination in a particular place –
gives up on the gospel,

God’s work will not stop.

The owner of the vineyard won’t sit idly by
while unfaithful tenants let it go to rack and ruin.

No. He will give the vineyard to other tenants.

Other churches or other denominations will spring up
to take the good news to the next generation

while the churches that have been unfaithful will wither and die.

Jesus needs to be at the absolute centre of our lives.

That’s the point Jesus is making by quoting Psalm 118 in the next verse.

“The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,

and it is marvellous in our eyes.”

The cornerstone is the most important part of the building of an arch.

Jesus is saying,

“Although I have been rejected by the leaders of God’s people,

God has made me the crucial part of his plan.”

Not only has God done it,

but it is marvellous.

What is so marvellous about it?

The story Jesus told sounds like a litany of failure.

Servants beaten and killed.

The Son killed.

The vineyard taken away from God’s people and given to others.

How could this be marvellous?
But truly in the power of God it is a marvellous story.
It is how the riches of God's undeserved love spread
to even such unlikely characters as you and I.
And the son who was killed,
raised to life on the third day,
given the name above every name,
that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow
in heaven and on earth and under the earth.
Even the tenants thrown out of the vineyard
for whom this story seems less than marvellous,
have the opportunity to put their trust in the risen Son,
and once more have a stake in the vineyard of God.

I think it's people who have looked for salvation in other places
and found it a cruel deception
who can best appreciate that Jesus the cornerstone is truly marvellous.
The temptation for me might be get all excited about a political salvation.
You have these politicians who oppose Christianity,
who call good evil.
And I could be tempted to think that if we just got rid of these politicians,
that life would be marvellous.
But the truth is that one group of self interested politicians
would be replaced by another lot,
and I would end up disillusioned.
Jesus is the cornerstone,
not some Christianised idea of living.

My next door neighbour who I grew up with
when I lived at home with Mum and Dad
thought that parties, drugs, sex and alcohol were marvellous.
Now in his fifties, I think he's pretty miserable.
He desperately needs to find Jesus.
Jesus is the cornerstone.

He's the only way my old friend could escape
from the disappointments of a wasted life.
He graduated from school and enrolled in medicine at university.
But he never finished uni and I don't think he's ever held down a job.
The sense of unfulfilled potential
must be a crushing disappointment to him.
How can you overcome such disappointment?
So many of the good things of this life have passed him by.
He will never marry and have kids.
He will never have a good job.
What can he look forward to?
Well if he only responded to Jesus,
then there would be a marvellous future in store for him.
And that's not just a good thing when you die.
It can take away the crushing disappointment of unfulfilled potential now.
In heaven, we will be the people God made us to be.
Our potential will be fulfilled in ways that we can't even imagine.

Jesus is the cornerstone.
Cheap imitations will always disappoint you.
Truly this is a marvellous story.
It is marvellous in our eyes.
We must never lose sight of the Lord Jesus.
The praise of his name must be ever on our lips.
He is the cornerstone of our lives –
the head of our church.