

The stubborn God

4 October 2020 – All Saints' Castlefields, Shrewsbury

St Matthew 21.33-43; 27th Sunday of Ordinary Time

The image of the vineyard and the vine is one of Scriptures richest and deepest metaphors, on a par with the image of the wedding feast. It provides an allegory for God's whole project of salvation, and of God's Covenant with his People. In our Gospel passage, Jesus adapts what Isaiah prophesied to his own listeners and to moment in salvation history that he was living through. His emphasis is not so much on the vineyard as on the workers in it. God is the lord and owner of the vineyard, indeed he planted it and created it. Because it was chosen and loved by God, he repeatedly sent prophets, who normally encountered rejection, opposition, violence, and even bloody death. Stubbornly – not normally something we say about God, but his love can be stubborn, he never seems to think better of it! – *stubbornly* God continues to send his representatives to his vineyard. But those who are responsible for the vineyard are motivated by a different desire: to own the vineyard for themselves.

That is what should scandalize us; *that* is the sharp edge of this parable as Jesus tells it so close to his own death. They want to become masters of the vineyard, masters of the people. It's a kind of betrayal. Their behavior is violent, inhuman, homicidal; they indulge in lies and abuse, they're unscrupulous, lacking any sense of responsibility, detached from reality, brutalized, manifesting a disrespect – for God and the people – that goes as far as killing. Their behaviour is that of a master, or rather what they think a 'master' should be, rather than that of a servant or a steward.

Such an attitude, which is completely indifferent to God and to human well being, is of course a great contrast with God's behaviour. He, as the source of goodness, stubbornly continues to believe in doing and giving good. So eventually God thinks, 'They will have respect for

my son'. 'Why!?' we ask as we listen to the parable. It is rather a pantomime moment in the story. 'O yes they will' says God, 'O no they won't' we cry back. We know where this story is going. And of course what happens is a huge and inevitable shock: the father and owner of the vineyard loses his son at the hands of those who want to possess the vineyard for themselves. It doesn't matter that it's rather an irrational story – our human desire for possession, security, self-advantage and control in our lives is not rational. Mention of the expulsion and killing of the owner's son is plainly an allusion to Jesus's death, outside the city gate (*Heb 13.12*). And it confirms the story as an allegory of the history of God with his people until the sending of the Son after the many sending of prophets.

The incident ends with a particularly severe warning from Jesus, addressed to the chief priests and the elders of the people: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruits of it" (*Matt 21.43*). They are words that call to mind the great responsibility of those in every epoch who are called to take responsibility for the Lord's people, especially those in roles of authority. And lest you think only of the clergy in this connection, let me remind you that one of the features of our Anglican life is that many lay people exercise a personal or shared authority in synods and in other leadership roles in our church. So it is not just the ordained who are responsible for the Church's fidelity and responsibility toward Christ.

But to return to the parable, I want to point you to the conversation that Jesus has with the chief priests and elders of the people. 'What should happen to such tenants?', Jesus asks. No doubt feeling that they are a little bit on thin ice, they reply, 'They should be cast out and replaced with others.' What very expectable behaviour from people whose minds work in just the way Jesus has described. It's a vehement answer, a merciless answer; it shares the same logic of violence mentioned in the parable. Jesus, by contrast then calls them back to Scripture and asks them if they have never read the text of

Psalm 118 on the rejected stone that has become the cornerstone. In other words he calls them back to what a *stubbornly loving God* is most likely to do, in contrast to them. What has been *rejected* by men, God *brings back* into play, and is made the cornerstone of something new. Jesus exposes that human choices and God's choice are different. On the one hand (our human decision and action) produces waste, waste people, waste communities, waste earth. On the other (God's decision and action) uses what man thinks to be waste, and uses it for his kingdom.

This parable challenges all of us – me included, but also you included – who have received the Gospel proclamation. Although in the history of the Church God has never failed to keep his promise of salvation, he has often had to resort to the kind of judgement of his church that is experienced as punishment, and it has died back for a time. The strength and extent of the Church often has ebbed and flowed. We know this not least from the history of the Church in our own country. It is not a sign of the deficiency of the gospel, or faith, or charity; but it might be a sign of the unwillingness of the church to think as God thinks, rather than as humanity thinks.

Is the same thing happening in our time? Nations and church communities like ours, once so rich in faith and vocations, are now losing their identity under the influence of destructive changes in our culture. Perhaps it is understandable for un-believers to behave as if God is dead; but in such a cultural atmosphere, is it not also a temptation for the Church to behave that way too? Do we functionally behave as if the Church were our possession, not God's? And does our daily news not amply illustrate that arbitrary power, selfish interests, injustice, exploitation and violence, treating mankind and creation as commodities, reveal mankind's tendencies when left to their own devices?

Yet there is promise in Jesus' words – eternal promise, because, God being eternal means that he is *eternally stubborn* in his redeeming

will. The vineyard will *not* be destroyed, nor will it be possessed by anyone but God. He will renew it on the foundation that man rejected. After his death, Christ did not remain in the tomb. On the contrary, precisely what seemed to have been definitively discarded, became the basis of a new and definitive victory. And it is to this victory that the Church, and its leaders, will be recalled.

In the interim it is likely that in the providence of God that the Church, not just ours, *will indeed grow smaller*. In all of the changes that we might guess at—and the virus has simply let us come to terms with what some of them may be—the Church will at length rediscover her conviction in what was always at her centre: faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ the Son of God made man, in the presence of the Spirit through the sacraments and in the human heart until the end of the world.

The comforting message that we gather from all these biblical texts is the certainty that the dead hand of humanity's control of the world's fate is not the last word; but that Christ, 'the Son of the stubborn God', always triumph and give life!