

Tenants of the Vineyard given by Revd. Canon John Hampton

On 8th October 2017

The story we've just heard used to be called the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, but it's now usually called the parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard. To be precise it isn't a parable at all; it's an allegory. An allegory is similar to a parable, but more complicated, because it is a story in which all the events and characters are used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning.

The metaphor of a vineyard to represent the Jewish kingdom and religion had been in use for hundreds of years, as we heard in the O.T. reading today and sang about in the psalm. The story of the wicked tenants is an allegory, with the tenants being the Jewish people and their religious leaders, the servants of the owner being the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and the owner's son being Jesus himself. The new tenants to whom the vineyard was to be handed over was the new, changed community, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God, which he himself felt he had come to inaugurate.

I grew up believing that Christianity was 'being good', keeping rules of behaviour about not lying, stealing etc. "Thou shalt not...". When I was confirmed (75 years ago!) I was given a little book of prayers which included a preparation of oneself before receiving Communion. It consisted largely of lists of questions. "Have you done this ..or that...; have you failed to

do this ... and that...? The Jewish Law (with a capital L) was similar, except that there were over 600 of them. Most of them were purity rules about avoiding anything which would make one ritually unclean and therefore not able to approach God or attend the temple worship. They weren't to do with being loving and caring and by the time of our Lord they had become hardened into a rigid system which, for example, limited how far one could walk on the Sabbath day. Do you remember that strange saying of Jesus about 'Corban' If someone had decided to give some money to the Temple it took priority over providing for one's parents if they were in need. So compassion was less important than keeping the rules.

This may have been what Jesus had in mind when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side may not simply have been callous. If they had touched blood or a dead body they would have become ritually unclean and not able to carry out their Temple duties. This was not to do with morality – it had become a rigid set of rules with no room for compassion.

And Jesus challenged this attitude and behaviour, particularly in the priests and Pharisees, in much of his teaching. He accused them, you remember perhaps, of 'laying burdens on people's shoulders and not lifting a finger to help them'. They were metaphorical burdens, of course, restrictive rules that

weighed people down. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”, he said on another occasion. And St. Paul put it differently when he wrote (2 Cor. 3.6) ‘the letter of the Law kills, but the Spirit gives life’. I could go on giving examples of the attacks of Jesus on the purity system of Jewish religion at that time, but I must get on to the theme of this Sunday’s readings.

What I’ve been saying is background information on the situation in which the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard was told. The Old Testament, which was Jesus’s Bible, continually shows that the Jewish people and religion had failed to serve God as he wishes, despite the warning of a succession of prophets. Because of his continual challenges to the religious authorities, Jesus knew well that he was going to receive opposition and probably ultimately silencing. So this story was yet another attempt to warn the authorities that God wanted a change of heart and mind in them.

What I’d like you to think about in all this is the obvious fact that Jesus realized and made clear in this story that he was going to be killed, because he would not stop criticizing the priests, scribes and Pharisees and calling for a change in them.

I’ve sometimes wondered whether I could sacrifice my life for someone else – and if I’m honest with myself I have to face the

fact that I probably wouldn't have the courage. Of course, it might be comparatively easy in the heat of the moment to risk one's life by jumping into a river to try to save someone who was drowning or to dash into a burning building to rescue someone. It would be a different matter, though, to do it with forethought, calmly and in cold blood – and wouldn't the blood be cold! It is frightening merely to think about it – to know that one was going to die in the hope of saving someone else. There have been people able to do it. Captain Oates, we're told, did it and no doubt many others who have remained unknown.

In one of the terrible concentration camps of the Second World War there was a Polish Franciscan friar named Maximilian Kolbe, who had been sent there because he had been harbouring Jews and hiding them from the Gestapo. One of the prisoners escaped from the camp and the camp commandant, to punish and warn the other prisoners, ordered ten of them to be starved to death. Among those selected at random was a young man with a wife and children. When the prisoners were called out, the priest stepped forward and asked to be allowed to take the young man's place. This request was granted and in the death cell Kolbe helped the others to prepare for death. He was the last to die and, because he took so long, he was given a lethal injection. After

his death they found a drawing of Jesus on the cross, scratched with his finger nails on the wall.

I don't suppose our Lord found it any easier or less frightening to face a painful death than you or I or Captain Oates or Maximilian Kolbe would. What do you suppose those beads of sweat falling like drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion were caused by, if not a struggle for courage or strength to die sacrificially?

It is on the cross that God is shown to be life-giving love. In the Letter to the Romans (5.7) St. Paul wrote, "Very rarely will anyone die for another person, though for a good person someone might dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us". In the Fourth Gospel Jesus is reported to have said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone should lay down his life for a friend. And you are my friends.....". Again in one of St. John's epistles, the writer said, "If God loved us so much we ought also to love one another.

I believe the Crucifixion is an appeal to us to respond to God's love with our own love. And religious rules should never be allowed to become more important than compassion.