

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking today: May we sing a love-song to our beloved, with visions of hillside vineyard, resplendent with luscious vines. Under the watchtower grew a harvest, yet the abundance of grapes were overcome by the wild. Your plans for your people, rejected by their own devious ways and selfish demands. May we heed their error, and in respect and faith come to worship you, Lord God.

Hymn CH4 436 – Christ triumphant, ever reigning

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Gracious and wonderful God, you are the planet-weaver, the skies declare your glory. You are the star-spinner and the vault of heaven proclaims your handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, night to night declares knowledge yet there are no words, their voices cannot be heard. but creation's pure sound reverberates throughout the cosmos for in the heavens you have set a tent for the sun and on earth a place for us all.

Yet we often forget that we are creations of your breath, tenants of your vineyard. We silence your voice. We subjugate your land. We mar your image within and around. We reject the cornerstone and kill your son. Yet you do not shy away. You meet our hate with love, our violence with steadfast loving kindness, our forgetfulness with remembrance.

Remind us this day and this night that we can kill your love but we cannot keep it dead and buried.

Redeem us each day and each night that we might live in tune with the words of your son, with the reverberations of your cosmos thus enabling the words of

our mouths and the meditation of all our hearts to be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 21: 33 - 46 (taken from The Good News Translation)

The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard

³³ "Listen to another parable," Jesus said. "There was once a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip. ³⁴ When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent his slaves to the tenants to receive his share of the harvest. ³⁵ The tenants grabbed his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again the man sent other slaves, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. ³⁷ Last of all he sent his son to them. 'Surely they will respect my son,' he said. ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the owner's son. Come on, let's kill him, and we will get his property!' ³⁹ So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

⁴⁰ "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" Jesus asked. ⁴¹ "He will certainly kill those evil men," they answered, "and rent the vineyard out to other tenants, who will give him his share of the harvest at the right time."⁴² Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read what the Scriptures say?

'The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all.

This was done by the Lord;
what a wonderful sight it is!

⁴³ “And so I tell you,” added Jesus, “the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits.” ⁴⁴

⁴⁵ The chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables and knew that he was talking about them, ⁴⁶ so they tried to arrest him. But they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.

Hymn CH4 374 – From heaven you came, helpless babe

Sermon – ‘Respect & Reject’

As we continue our journey through Matthews’s account of the Parables of Jesus, in the Good News Translation of the Bible, today’s is called ‘The Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard’. Yet, other translations give it a different title: ‘The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.’ This led me to wonder, last Wednesday, if you have ever had experience of a ‘wicked tenant’? I then thought I would do some research to try and define what exactly makes a tenant a ‘wicked one’ or at least a ‘bad one’.

So, on to the internet I went, and I came across a website called, ‘The Tenants Voice’, which had an article entitled, ‘*What Makes a Good Tenant Good ? And What Doesn’t...*’¹ In the article the writer suggests that tenants who do not read the leasing agreement or contract fully can easily become bad tenants because they don’t know the full terms and conditions. Once signed all you have to do is not do what is not allowed. Typical examples are:

- If you’re not allowed to sublet, you can’t sublet.
- If you’re not allowed to redecorate or repaint, you can’t redecorate or repaint.
- If you’re not allowed to smoke inside, you can’t smoke inside.
- If you DO want to do something that is not allowed, you need to get the landlord’s consent. You probably won’t get permission, but if you have a good reason, you might. In any case – you don’t ask, you don’t get.

¹ What Makes a Good Tenant Good ? And What Doesn’t...

https://www.thetenantsvoice.co.uk/your_home/what-makes-a-good-tenant/ 30/09/2020

- The consequences for breaking a term of the agreement can range from a £20 deduction from your deposit to an eviction. This contract is as serious as it gets really, so you can't afford to disregard it.

In today's parable, the tenants really are wicked. The rental property was a vineyard, and the rent was grapes. The tenants were to share the fruit of the vineyard with the landowner. Yet, before the landowner rented the vineyard, he did some refurbishment work—upgrading his property. He put a fence around it, dug a wine press, built a watchtower. He made it as nice as a vineyard could be, and then he leased it to the tenants and went away.

At harvest time, the landowner sent servants to collect his share of the fruit—but the tenants beat one servant and killed another and stoned another. That's even worse than selling all the furniture in the property and buying your own or painting the beige living room, illuminous purple. So, the landowner sent more servants. The tenants beat and killed them too. Finally, the landowner sent his son, expecting that they would respect his son.

Now after the first lot of servants did not return, you could be forgiven for coming to the conclusion, that the landowner is not very smart. Why would he send more servants? Why not call the police? Why not put the wicked tenants in jail? Above all, why would he finally send his son? If the tenants were violent twice, why would he think they would treat his son with respect? How daft is this landowner?

The answer is that the landowner was not daft but he did have a heart full of love. The landowner as you have probably guessed in this parable is God—and this is a parable about God's longsuffering patience—His love and desire to redeem the wicked tenants. That might not seem to make much sense, but God is like that. God loves us even when we least deserve it. God wants us to love Him, so that He can bless us. God keeps trying to win us – even when we have proven that we are not very lovable.

So, God, this landowner puts it all on the line. He sent his son to collect the rent, hoping that the tenants would respect his son. However, they didn't respect the

son. When they saw the son, they said, "*Come on, let's kill him, and we will get his property!*" And so, they forced the son out of the vineyard and killed him.

The Landowner's son, of course, is Jesus. Before Jesus began telling this parable, He had cleansed the temple—had used a whip to run off the moneychangers. He had made quite a nuisance of himself, and the religious leaders hated him. So, Jesus told them this parable about the wicked tenants killing the landowner's son.

Then he asked this question (v.40): "*Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?*" They answered: "*He will certainly kill those evil men, and rent the vineyard out to other tenants, who will give him his share of the harvest at the right time.*" Then Jesus quoted a verse from Isaiah that talked about the rejected stone becoming the chief cornerstone—the most important stone. He then concluded; "*And so I tell you, "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits"*.

That last sentence is a little mysterious, but Jesus was warning them that God's patience has limits! Those who persist in rejecting God will find themselves crushed by the stone with which God had intended to help them. Jesus was warning us to be careful about stretching our rebellion too far because it will snap back in our face.

"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is not so much a punishment for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the recognition of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have excluded themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is not a reward but a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom.

If you want to know what the fruits of the kingdom look like then look at the life of God revealed in Jesus. What do you see? Love, intimacy, mercy, forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing,

reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility. I'm not talking about these things as abstract ideas but as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives.

We have all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse or partner, our children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, our dreams, and our concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not.

If we have signed up to God's terms and conditions, His leasing agreement and then we do not produce kingdom fruits, have we not excluded ourselves from and rejected God and our share in the kingdom? How? Well, we are not living as the person God knows us to be or as the person we truly want to be. You could argue that we have somehow, 'stepped' outside of ourselves and 'sidestepped' our own life. That is the truth that Jesus' confronts the Pharisees with and it is the same truth that Jesus confronts us with today.

So, how does that happen? What does self-exclusion look like? Let me suggest some bullet-points for starters:

- Do you ever struggle with perfectionism, self-condemnation, and the question of whether you're enough? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you ever feel like you have to be in control, be right, have all the answers? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you carrying grudges, anger, resentment? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Do you look at others and begin making judgments about their belief, choices, or lifestyle? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are there people in your life that you have chosen to let go of rather than do the work of reconciliation and heal the relationship? Maybe that's self-exclusion.

- Do you go through life on auto-pilot, going through the motions but never really being present, never showing up? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- In your life is there more criticism and cynicism than thanksgiving and celebration? Maybe that's self-exclusion.
- Are you hanging onto some old guilt that you believe could not be forgiven? Maybe that's self-exclusion.

The solution to our self-exclusion from God's kingdom begins with first recognizing that self-exclusion. That means we must look at the vineyards of our lives. So, how's your garden growing? What do you see? Is there fruit? Is there life? Are you sharing in God's kingdom?

I want to finish by asking you to look out your Bible at some point over the coming week, sit in your most comfortable seat and read this Parable again. We are tenants in God's vineyard. As you read, I want to challenge you to assess your life. Ask yourself if you are paying your 'rent' and giving God what He is 'due'. Ask yourself whether you are 'respecting' God's will for your life by cooperating with Him, or, are you 'rejecting' God by rebelling against Him?

Once you have done that, take five minutes to think about our church as a whole. How can we follow God's plan for our church's life. How do we celebrate God's presence in worship. Share the Good News with others. Introduce or reintroduce people to a relationship with God. How do we equip all of us for 'ministry' through God's love?

The answers to these questions, we will talk about another day, but for today, we should remember that we are tenants in God's vineyard and when we respect God, we become heirs to abundant life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Music for Reflection – 'Is He Worthy?' – Keith & Kristyn Getty

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

If all our accomplishments, all our acumen, all our wisdom, our work, our will were to be stripped away we still belong to you, O God. Therefore we press onwards towards the goal. Not to earn your grace but to share your love.

So we pray for the twisting of our priorities, for the confusion of our belonging, for the marring of your image. We are your children, we are your tenants, we are made in your image. May we live up to that reality, in our actions and thoughts. We pray that those in power might seek service over celebrity and work to uplift the poor rather than their popularity.

We pray that those without power might find strength in you and partners in us even when we feel powerless.

We pray for the courage and strength to press onward.

We pray for humility and compassion to transcend the past and press forward to what lies ahead.

For you are our beginning, you are our present, you are our destination. Amen

Hymn CH4 200 – Christ is made the sure foundation

Benediction

As one of God's children you are not cast aside. God loves you and cherishes you. You belong and are treasured. Take this affirmation and live into it this week. May you feel God's love, Christ's inclusion, and the Spirit's presence as you go, and may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit, be with you and all whom you love this day and forevermore. Amen.