The parable of the wicked tenants by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 4th October 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-46

Year A Proper 22

Introduction

Over the last few weeks we have been listening to teachings of Jesus in the form of parables. Three weeks ago it was the parable of the unforgiving servant[1], with a strong reminder from Jesus that for his followers, putting relationships right is not an optional extra. Then we heard the parable of the workers in the vineyard[2], or the parable of the generous landlord, encouraging us to be grateful to God for his generous provision for our needs and his grace.

Last week there was the short parable of the two sons, and we heard Jesus say that tax collectors and prostitutes were going into the Kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders,[3] a reminder that there's hope for us all. But the parable also challenged us to make sure our religion isn't just nice words but actions. It's no good "talking the talk" in church if we're not prepared to "walk

[1] Matthew 18:21-35
[2] Matthew 20:1-16
[3] Matthew 21:28-32

the walk" the rest of the week. And we'll be looking at this theme again tonight from the first letter of John.

The parable of the wicked tenants

So today we come to another famous parable of Jesus, the parable of the wicked tenants. It's that time of year when up and down the country churches are holding Harvest Festivals, and next week we'll be celebrating Harvest here. But this week's Gospel reading also has a harvest theme. A vineyard owner invests time, money and energy in planting a vineyard and equipping it with a protective wall and watchtower and a winepress for turning the grapes into wine. He lets it out to tenants and then travels abroad. But at harvest time he sends his servants to collect his share of the produce. The tenants, in their arrogance, think they can treat the vineyard as their own. They not only refuse to give anything to the owner, but even beat and kill the owner's messengers. You can imagine that Jesus' audience are already a little shocked at this behaviour of the tenants, but then the owner sends his son, and they kill him too.

If you're familiar with Jesus' parables, you'll know that they are sometimes shocking, and deliberately so. Jesus wants his hearers – and that includes us – to pay attention to the point he is making, and to do something about it. In this case, however, he is making a prediction about his own death at the hands of the religious authorities – although they use the Roman governor Pilate to do their dirty work for them.

And we see from the reaction that Jesus gets to his parable that the religious leaders recognise that he is referring to them.

The meaning of the parable

So what's going on here? You will have realised that Jesus is talking about much more than grapes, or what to bring to a Harvest Festival. Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah[4] gives us a clue as to what Jesus is talking about. Both in this prophecy of Isaiah and in other parts of the Old Testament[5] the image of the vineyard is used as a symbol of the nation of Israel. So Jesus' hearers know that the parable is an allegory.

The vineyard in Jesus' parable represents the Kingdom of God which has been entrusted to Israel and its leaders, represented by the tenants. But the tenants won't deliver the goods to the owner. God looks for fruit to come, but there is none. It's not that the vineyard can't produce any, but that the tenants want all the goodies for themselves.

Jesus picks up a common theme in the Old Testament of Israel disobeying God, and its leaders are held responsible for not only allowing but encouraging idolatry and social injustice. God sends the prophets (the owner's slaves in the parable) to remind those in charge of the "vineyard" to pay up – but they are ignored,

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[4] Isaiah 5:1-7

[5] Ezekiel 17:5-10, 19:10-14, Psalm 80:8-15, Jeremiah 2:21, Hosea 10:1

beaten and even killed. And now, Jesus says, the owner of the vineyard, i.e. God, has sent his only Son, and what happens to the son in the story is what will happen to Jesus only a few days later – the tenants, that is the Jewish authorities, not only reject him but kill him.

Then Jesus turns to his audience and gets them involved. "What do you think the owner will do to the tenants?" he asks. And those who have been listening thus far give their opinion:

> They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'[6]

And Jesus agrees, and makes this prediction:

> Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.[7]

If we think about what happened in the years following the death and resurrection of Jesus we can see all of this coming true. The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Romans in AD70 in response to the Jewish revolt would certainly have been seen by the early Christians as a consequence of the nation's failure to welcome its Messiah[8]. And the kingdom of God was most certainly opened up to people of all ethnicities as the early Church took shape and began to welcome those who were not

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[6] Matthew 21:41 NRSV
[7] Matthew 21:43 NRSV
[8] See Luke 20:41-43

Jews as equal members.

A word of warning

But as I say this, I need to sound an important note of caution. Over the centuries many Christians have ended up treating all Jewish people as the enemy, and at times this has been the official position of Church authorities, resulting in terrible persecution of Jewish minorities in so-called Christian countries. Although we as individuals were not directly responsible for events in the past, we must recognise that this shameful legacy has resulted in profound injustices. As Christians we must be totally against anti-Semitism, as with all forms of racism.

Whose Kingdom, whose church?

So much for the historical context of Jesus' parable. But if we believe that God has now entrusted his Kingdom to the care of the Church, then *we* are now the tenants, and we need to be very careful that we are not guilty of the arrogance which the tenants displayed in Jesus' parable. The Kingdom of God does not belong to us. And the Church itself, the worldwide Body of Christ, does not belong to us either – it belongs to Jesus Christ. We are, as the apostle Paul put it, stewards of the gospel[9]. And we are accountable to God. Just like the tenants in the parable, we are responsible for producing the fruit of good works and mission to the world.

Let's do a bit of lateral thinking. We have seen what

[9] 1 Corinthians 4:1-2

happens to companies that don't deliver the profits to their shareholders – they end up being taken over, sold or going into liquidation. If there were shares in the Church of England, I wonder what their value would be now? Would we be in danger of being taken over? I wonder which other denomination could put together a rescue package that would build on the goodwill, the physical assets and the customer base of CofE plc and relaunch the company?

Time for some introspection

What about our church here in Aldenham? Are we giving God a good return on investment? It's not just about getting more bums on pews - though that would be a start. But are we adding value to people's experience of life and of God? Does the work of this church lead to transformed lives which influence people around them? Do the lives of those who attend this church bear fruit in obedience, mercy, kindness, generous giving, healthy relationships and a positive witness to the world? Are we Christians any different from those who live around us who don't come to church, and those who don't profess any faith in God? When God comes looking for fruit in our lives and in our church, will he get any? How will God call us to account as individuals, as leaders? And as the leader of this church, I need to ask myself, How am I performing? How could I do better?

Take a moment to think about this church: what might a newcomer be looking for? Would they find it? What is good about this church now, and how can we build on it?

What is missing? Can you think of any ideas for how we could make progress? What part could you play in filling the gaps? Three years ago you took part in an exercise called Mission Action Planning, which identified a Vision, Priorities and Goals. I think it might be a good idea in the near future to revisit this, and see how we're doing against what was agreed three years ago.

I couldn't do the parable justice without mentioning the consequences of *not* delivering the goods. This is, after all, Jesus' punchline. At the end of the day, a company that can't turn in a profit will be sold. Tenants who don't pay rent will be evicted. And a church that doesn't bear fruit will die. And God will give the kingdom to others who will produce the fruit. They may be outsiders now, but in God's economy they can become successful producers. The churches in the developing world that were started by European missionaries are now growing fast while we are declining. God is too skilful a fund manager to miss opportunities for real growth in value if another market has potential.

We should not be so complacent as to think that our church will last for ever. In one episode of the TV cartoon show, "The Simpsons," the young brat, Bart, is asked to say grace. He prays, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." When we start thinking we're the owners rather than the tenants, we are storing up trouble for ourselves. This is true of our individual lives as much as it is of the church. But humbly acknowledging that what we have comes from God, and

giving back to him, is the way to true fruitfulness.

Conclusion

Today's parable challenges us to think about our stewardship of the things God has entrusted to us – money, health, time, gifts and talents, and above all the gospel message. Are we delivering the goods as a church? And as individual Christians? Let us take a moment to consider what is it that God wishes to see in our lives, so that we may joyfully and gratefully return it to him, from whom all good things proceed.