

Sermon for 8 October 2017 (Trinity 17) at 9.30am

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I'd like to start this morning, by asking you to exercise your imagination a little. Yes, I know.. I'm not surprised that you're all inwardly groaning and preparing to switch off; it's not my favourite exercise either. But just humour me a little, please –we'll switch into normal sermon mode soon, I promise.

I'd like you to imagine yourself into the being of a venerable and well-respected Jewish man, living in Jerusalem about two thousand years ago. His name is Simeon, white- bearded, but well preserved for his years and very upright physically and morally. He's a man of God, steeped in the Torah and the laws of the Temple, where he spends much of his time. His whole life since boyhood has been spent learning about and serving his God and he has always obeyed the laws laid down both by the Scriptures and the Temple authorities. He spends his time with like-minded people, with whom he shares a mutual respect and common values and understanding. Now in the autumn of his life, he can look back and see the mistakes he's made, not many , for he has led an essentially clean life, a good life, and done harm to no-one. He believes sincerely that he has always tried to discern God's will. Like most Jews, he's awaiting the coming of the promised Messiah, and has a clear view of what that person will be, though he doubts it will happen in his lifetime. Satisfied with his life and his faith, Simeon would almost call himself a righteous man, though he'd rather the words came from others than himself. He hopes to spend the remaining days of his life in tranquillity and contentment, satisfied that he has served his God well, because he is, of course, a Pharisee. Does this remind you of someone?

Into Simeon's life of ordered holiness, a thunderbolt has struck. A young upstart, a carpenter by trade, with what seems to be a minimal training in the Scriptures, is rampaging up and down the country, collecting followers who claim he's the Messiah, using carefully selected verses from the Torah to justify their thinking. This Jesus is preaching hell-fire and brimstone to those in authority, mixing with undesirables and apparently performing all sorts of inexplicable feats of healing.... and crowds are flocking to hear him. As if this weren't bad enough, he's continually attacking Simeon verbally – not by name of course, but with stories whose characters are very thinly veiled replicas of Simeon and his fellow Pharisees. It really is relentless. This Nazarene outsider is offensive, aggravating, evasive yet confrontational and very dangerous in his threat to the stability of both temple and nation. And with his latest story, the worst by far, he's verging on the blasphemous.

So imagining over... we've got some idea, I hope, of how the Pharisees felt as they listened to this morning's parable, the parable of the wicked tenants. It's a stark, cruel story and it makes for uncomfortable reading. The Pharisees understood exactly what Jesus meant; there were too many references to their scriptures not to. They knew they were the tenants, and that the vineyard represented Israel, the owner stood for God and the slaves were the line of prophets sent by God. Certainly, the Pharisees heard Jesus and they "realised he was speaking about them". This was a very clear and stark warning to them; their rigid mind-set and obstructive attitudes were hindering God's purpose in the building of his new kingdom. If they didn't mend their ways there would be no place in that kingdom for them.

It's also a parable full of depth, sorrow and power as it paints Jesus' perspective on the events he's involved in. The final envoy sent by his Father, he knows that even though he is the cornerstone, the Son, and offering a chance for repentance and reconciliation, yet he will be rejected and crushed. It won't be the end for him; he will finally take his place at the centre of the new kingdom God is building, but there will be no place for those who refuse this last opportunity.

The Pharisees didn't see it like that. As far as they were concerned, there was no need for repentance. There was no need for reconciliation. They had followed God's way, they were the chosen ones and any claim to the contrary was ridiculous. The idea that the fulfilment of God's promise should be manifest in this wandering preacher whose disregard of necessary rules and regulations was turning things inside out was not to be given any credence whatsoever. We can almost see the look of incredulity on Simeon's face now.

So, with the benefit of hindsight and all that we've been taught, we look at the Pharisees with condemnatory eyes. Yet, the parable, and the confrontation it provokes, are like a mirror held before us so that we might take a very close look at ourselves. Here we are, a well-respected community, living in a comfortable suburb of a fast growing city. We're people of God, steeped in the Bible and the customs of the Anglican Church. Many of us have spent long periods of our lives learning about and worshipping God. We enjoy coming together as like-minded folk, who share mutual respect and common values and understanding. We look at ourselves and see the mistakes we've made, not many, for we've led essentially clean lives, good lives and done harm to no-one. We come to church regularly, proud to call ourselves Christians. We think of ourselves as religious and try to discern God's will and to obey his laws faithfully. Secretly we may even deem ourselves worthy of a pat on the back because we've done well for our God.

Yet here's a question I ask thoughtfully and prayerfully, because I know it may offend and upset some of us – and I ask it of myself as well as of you. Are we not, like the Pharisees, in danger of becoming smug, complacent and blinkered? And if not all of the time, at least some of it? If we're honest with ourselves, I think we may admit that despite our faith and our love of our Lord, there are times when we obstruct his purpose and inhibit the growth of his kingdom; those times when we close our minds to all opinions other than our own, when we're convinced that it is others who are out of step, when the reality is exactly the opposite, when our narrow vision and intolerance undermine the very faith we proclaim. There are moments, too when we fail to recognise, or turn away from God's messages to us because they arrive in a way we don't expect, or in the form of people we don't like. We have been given our own vineyards - our lives, our work, our families and our relationships - and we don't like them to be shaken or turned upside down.

Though it is a dark, harsh parable, and a warning that we cannot take God's grace for granted, it carries nevertheless a message of hope. It's not so much about exclusion and condemnation as about God's unwillingness to give up. Jesus didn't give up on the Pharisees; all his dealings with them, the parables, the conversations, the question and answer sessions gave them repeated opportunities to open themselves to the truth he was declaring. Even on the cross, he interceded with his Father for them: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do". And God never gives up on us. Each time we separate ourselves from him by our arrogance, our complacency or our refusal to listen, God just keeps on coming right back, giving us again and again opportunities for repentance and reconciliation. This is an act of the deepest love for us; the love which sacrificed his Son, the cornerstone, to death in order that we might share in his kingdom. As we proclaim Christ to be the cornerstone of our lives, let's pray that he will always challenge us when our faith grows stale and that we may always remember that the truth lies in Him and not in ourselves. May we always work with him and not against him for the growth of his vineyard, his kingdom here on earth.