

'The parable of the evil farmers' – What is the use of the cross?

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

"Come to me and listen to my words, hear me and you will have life. – Is.55,3

Collect:

Almighty God, your Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross. Give us faith to perceive his glory, that being strengthened by his grace we may be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Readings: Is.5,1-7 / Ps.25 / Rom.5,1-11

Mk.12,1-12:

Jesus began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard, He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."

But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So, they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'?

Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them, but they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Dear friends

The view this parable opens up to us on the state of things between God and his people, and through that on the state of matters of faith and eternity, is perhaps surprising to us and shocking, because we find the picture is filled with conflict and hostility, betrayal and violence. It is also directly pointed at those to whom it is told, announcing judgment as they readily understand.

Indeed, the audience reacts with rage and become themselves the acting agents in the parable. If Jesus had not been on the way to his execution already before telling this parable, he would most certainly have been after telling it. And he knew what he was doing.

In the parable he refers to events in the past, such as the prophets of old, their message and fate, but he also refers to an event yet to come, which in the course of the parable is its climax: and that is his own execution, the cross. The parable, therefore, is crucial for understanding the context in which Jesus' death occurs and what the use of it is.

Indeed, the most important question of what Christ's death is useful for appears in Jesus' end-question and -answer: *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'?"* The cross of Jesus brings a development, a state of things, to its climax, but is as such also a turning point, the beginning of something new.

Now the state of things as it stands between God and his people, in the description of the parable, is one marked by hostility towards God and conflict with him, by a lack of the kind of fruit God delights in. That this was the theme of Jesus' parable was understood clearly by his hearers. To what effect? Well, they were outraged at hearing themselves described as enemies of God, as being in conflict with him, as people who abuse what God entrusts to them, who withhold goodness, righteousness and love from others and maltreat God's word-bearers, doing all things for their own sakes and their own ends; having every regard, not for what pleases God – like goodness, mercy, truth -, but for what pleases them, even to have for themselves what is God's. Surely this could be justifiably be said of the Gentiles, of people who do not know God and don't care for his word, don't have the temple (don't go to the synagogue) and are generally given to immoral ways and attitudes...; but not of the people of God, esp. the high achievers – the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders!

Yet this is what Jesus says of them! What do we say? Should we mark this off as a critique aimed exclusively at the Jews? Should we not rather recognise that what appears here is not a national characteristic particular to the Jews, but a human characteristic particular to all?

Should we not understand this when we consider that Jesus died for all, that he was to be "the lamb who bears the sins of the world", that the cross of Christ was to be preached to all because all by our nature are in need of what the cross achieved?

The context in which the death of Christ occurred is as true of us as it was of those who killed him! Otherwise Christ is not the Saviour of all! The hostility towards God, the betrayal of what God entrusted to his people, the state of being in conflict with God's will, the violation and rejection of goodness, mercy and truth for one's own sake: all this led to the execution of the Son of God, and all of this is – my sin.

As Jesus tells the parable, his hearers realise the claim upon them to repent and change their ways, that Jesus' life and word is God's claim upon them to do his will. But as the parable goes on to show, they are unwilling and unable to do so, because they don't want to give up on possessing the vineyard and having it for themselves; that is, they want to see their desires for what is contrary to God's will and neglectful of it affirmed and given sanction! Claiming to serve God and be his people and own his ways, they are hiding before themselves the fact of a deep-seated hostility towards God, fuelled by the desire to be in command at their own pleasure and have their ways and wills sanctioned despite their lack of godliness and fruitfulness.

His hearers, enraged to be depicted in this way, then shockingly reveal the truth of it later by executing God's claim on them to change their minds, throwing "him out of the vineyard" and declaring him hostile and the enemy of God! But did they not thus declare their own hostility?

Dear friends, if this is sin, is not sin, then, familiar to all of us? If hostility is able to masquerade as righteousness, as goodness, as spirituality, as religious insight and understanding, as moral rectitude etc. and be hidden under it, are there any eyes that see in which no speck is found?

Dear friends. What of the hostility towards God? *“What will the owner of the vineyard do?”* Jesus does not leave the question open or unanswered: *“He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”* In other words, there must be a killing and a giving. In the vineyard, that is, in the place of those hostile to God and to everyone, there must be “others”. Those “others” we all must become and be! Those “others”, who will bring in due season their fruit of love, mercy, goodness, patience, peace, who love and do the will of God.

And the thing that is *“wonderful in our eyes”* (when we see it), is that it is the Son himself in whose execution the hostility towards God is born and judged. That is what Jesus goes to the cross for: to be rejected, so as to become the cornerstone of a new, another structure. In him takes place the killing of hostility and in him takes place the giving of the new vineyard.

Will we let the cross of Christ deal with our hostility as we bring it to him in repentance, believing that he died for our sins and gives grace so that we may begin to live for him? Or do we insist on our hostility, rejecting the grace of God as not needed, and wait for the coming of the owner of the vineyard to give us the end of our own will?

“Just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom.5,6-10) AMEN

And can it be

- 1 And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!
- 2 ’Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies:
who can explore His strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
’Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
let angel minds inquire no more.
- 3 He left His Father’s throne above –
so free, so infinite His grace –
emptied Himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam’s helpless race.
’Tis mercy all, immense and free;
for, O my God, it found out me!
- 4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

my chains fell off, my heart was free.
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

5 No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne,
and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Words by Charles Wesley

Lord God, we think of your people and how they rejected the word of your prophets time and again, how your call to them fell on deaf ears time and again, and how things culminated in the rejection of your Son; and we think how true it is that we are of the same stuff: that in our own way we do the same and hide from ourselves the hostility which is at work in us preventing the fruit in which you delight and which Jesus manifested so beautifully. But you demonstrated your love for us by sending your Son to die on the cross for us and in him to judge *our* sins. Merciful and gracious God, open our hearts to the influence of your Spirit that through knowledge of Jesus Christ by faith we may become in him those "others" to whom the vineyard shall be given, to the praise and glory of your name.

- time of prayer / intercession –

'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. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN