

Matthew 21: 33 to end

'Listen to another parable,' says Jesus: 'There was a landowner who planted a vineyard.' Actually it's not so much a parable as a rather complex *allegory*. There's the *vineyard* (with its fences and wine-press and tower to guard against human and animal threats) --- *that* stands for the people of Israel, an image Isaiah had used long ago; there's the absentee landlord who is *God*; there are the *tenants* (who won't pay the landlord his due and are plotting to take *over* the vineyard) --- they are the spiritual leaders of Israel, who refused to accept the teaching of God's servants the prophets, and ill-treated them, and now seem intent on killing the Son *himself* --- who of course is *Jesus*. The chief priests and Pharisees realise that Jesus is attacking *them* --- *they* are the wretches who will lose their tenancy and be punished.

The gospels give several accounts of Jesus attacking various Jewish leaders, and his regular target is the *Pharisees*. Now I'm uncomfortable when I read about those attacks; because the Pharisees could be a valuable spiritual force in the land. They were a sort of lay religious order, quite numerous, permeating society: men committed to study and teaching and to the highest observance of the Law; and they seem, generally, to

have had a reputation for piety. Usually they were *family* men (though some apparently took vows of chastity); they were people involved in every kind of business and occupation. They were leading lights in the synagogues. *Some* were members of the highest religious court in the land, the Sanhedrin, where they passed judgement along with the high priests; generally, though, they were the 'democratic' spiritual leaders, concerned for ordinary folk --- unlike the elitist *Sadducees*. In the year 70 AD everything changed: the city of Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed after siege by the Romans; from then on there was no place for priests, because there was no temple in which they could lead worship and offer sacrifices; and much of the city's population was dispersed --- then it was the *Pharisees* who morphed into the *Rabbis* who kept the Jewish faith alive wherever in the world Jews settled.

But they could have their faults, as Jesus makes clear: some loved to make a show of their religiosity, or were downright hypocrites; or they might manipulate the Law and prey on their less sophisticated fellow Jews; and they (like the leaders before them) might ignore or persecute any new 'prophet' who seemed to be upsetting the religious status quo --- notably *Jesus* in this case.

And the reason why Jesus denounced them so fiercely (I suppose) was for the very reason that many of them *were* so dedicated, and had such a *potential* for spiritual leadership, and *could* have opened people's eyes to the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus --- and failed to do so!

That's how Jesus's hearers took the 'parable' --- as a denunciation of failed spiritual leaders who had become (in Jesus's words) 'blind guides'. And the story *also* made sense to the early Xians in the new young church. The vineyard was still God's people, but now it was an *enlarged* people including Jew and gentile and potentially all the *world*. The owner's Son had indeed been murdered --- thrown out of the vineyard, outside the city wall, to die on Golgotha; and he had given his life for all their sakes. Those in charge of the farm were no longer *disloyal* and *corrupt* 'tenants', but church leaders who laboured only to do the owner's (God's) will, and return to him the fruits of their labours.

And among those new leaders was another *Pharisee*, St Paul. He never ceased to be proud of his impeccable Jewish background, and his status as a learned Pharisee; but he wouldn't *boast* about all this because it counted as nothing against 'knowing Christ'. Now he was the foremost apostle.

So how should *we* see the 'parable'? How should I see it? I am thankful to be part of this *new* vineyard ---- the 'people of God' in which (Paul taught) there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female; the world-wide vineyard that should be open to everyone, all-embracing, inclusive. Sadly, we're not there yet, but we continue to break down barriers of colour and class and sexuality and race, and mental and physical ability. The old Israel had always had a tendency to become restrictive and to discourage people from entering; *we* seek to make all welcome; we shouldn't have *fences* any more.

I try never to forget who *is* the owner of this vineyard, and I hope to give God his due in praise and gratitude and service, and in fruits of the Spirit.

I've had a part in the *tenancy* of the vineyard, as priest and pastor; I'm thankful for having been brought up as a Xian, for my education and training, for whatever knowledge and understanding of the faith I've acquired; but these are not things to be boasted about. What I *need* to do is appreciate that, in this wider, more inclusive vineyard, there are many people from all sorts of backgrounds and varieties of life-experiences who have a lot to teach me and our congregations and the church

at large, a lot to contribute. We mustn't ignore or despise (as the Pharisees did) *any* of the servants and prophets whom God is sending. 'There was a landowner who planted a vineyard.'

[And having had a part in the 'tenancy' of the vineyard, as priest and teacher --- I'm thankful for my Xian formation and the education I've received and any religious knowledge and understanding I've imbibed; but I know I mustn't boast about these things, or fail to notice that in this new open vineyard there are people of very different backgrounds and experiences from mine, by whom God has much to teach *me* and *all* of us. I hope not to ignore or despise (as the Pharisees did) *any* messengers