

**There was once a man who planted a vineyard. Accept or Reject?
Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46**

The mayor of Johannesburg is on a campaign to get rid of tenants who have hijacked buildings belonging to others. The tenants have moved in, refused to pay rental, refused to recognise the landlord and in some cases representatives of the landlords, have been killed when trying to intervene. It is not just tenants.

The law reports record many instances of employees, agents, franchisees, and representatives who have either misused or stolen the property entrusted to them. These are persons who have been given every opportunity to do well both for themselves and for the owner, but have turned rogue and ignored the owner. The owner who had trusted them and entrusted to them the property in question.

What does the owner feel? Completely disappointed, let down, and betrayed. And retaliation follows. Applications for interdicts, termination of the contract and claims for damages.

And as we consider the passages read for us this morning we will realise that this is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

 Given everything but wanting more.

 Living with all of God's provision - but wanting to be God!

It is the story of the nation of Israel.

It is the story of Jesus.

And it remains the story of our times.

The song from Isaiah 5:

*"5:1 I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit. ..."*

God created the ideal vineyard so that it would produce good fruit.

The question is asked: "What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?"

But it yielded only bad fruit. God was looking for good fruit from the vineyard. Some response for what had been done. But there was none.

The vineyard is the house of Israel and the vines are the men of Judahⁱⁱ that disappoint God. This after He could do no more to create a fruit bearing vineyard, a fruit bearing nation.

But after having been given all to the nation, the nation disappoints God to the point where He takes all away from them. Isaiah wrote this: God will take away the

protection of the hedge and break down the wall so that the vineyard will be trampled and the vines destroyed with no clouds and no rain.

God has patiently and lovingly cared for His people. But the people remain stubborn, and headstrong and the covenant made with God is forgotten.

We see this again and again.

There is no recognition that the people are living in God's vineyard, that they are the tenants and not the owners.

Remember how Moses was barely away from his people before the golden calf was cast to be worshipped.

Joshua knows his people and calls on them before they enter the Promised Land to be mindful of who they will serve. He tells them, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord".ⁱⁱⁱ And then he calls on them to commit to this. They say they will but history shows that they do not do so.

When we look at the parable of the tenants Jesus echoes the song recorded in Isaiah 5. And his listeners would have been aware of the words of that song and the teaching contained in that song.

The owner has land. He clears the land, plants vines, builds a wall, a watchtower and a winepress so that fruit will grow and the vineyard be protected.

Jesus put it like this:

³³ "Listen to another parable^{iv}: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit."

The man who planted this vineyard was a careful and generous man who wanted the vineyard, and the tenant farmers who would farm it, to succeed. He builds a wall to protect the vineyard, he digs a winepress and builds a watchtower for the protection of the tenants. And so the tenant farmers are given everything that they need to be successful: both for the land owner and themselves. The arrangement was a common one. Tried and tested, the farmers knowing that when the harvest came the owner would collect his share of the crop.

But as Jesus tells the story it takes a twist. The owner sends his servants.

"When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit."

The tenants forgetting all that has been done for them turn on the servants and brutally beat one, kill one and stone the third. Clearly feeling that they owe nothing to the one who has done all for them. They feel now that that they have done all the work and that they deserve all the fruit, the benefits.

The owner sends more servants than the first time but they receive the same treatment.

Then the owner sends his son: "They will respect my son," he said.

But the owner's trust is misplaced. The tenants now see this as an opportunity to take over everything. This is the son who will inherit: ""Let's kill him and take his inheritance." ³⁹ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."

The four role players;

-  The landowner is God;
-  The tenants are the teachers and the elders;
-  The servants/messengers are the prophets; and
-  The Son is Jesus.

Consider each of these role players.

-  The landowner is God.

Jesus follows the passage from Isaiah talking about the landowner, the farmer who prepares a vineyard. He is talking of God. God as creator of the garden for Adam and Eve. God who covenants with the nation of Israel and who guides them, feeds them and protects them in every way for as long as they follow him. He is talking of God who sends His Son to live among us here on this earth. God who gives everything so that good fruit will appear. The arrangement is a generous one aimed at benefitting the landowner and the tenants. The tenants have been given a fruitful vineyard with a wall, a winepress and a watchtower. They will receive the full production only less the share to be returned to the landowner.

-  The tenants are the teachers and the elders.

The tenants are the teachers and the elders but they also represent us. All has been given to the tenants to respond by producing good fruit and bringing joy to the landowner. But greed sets in. They start thinking: we have done all the work. The landowner is absent. We haven't seen him. Aren't we actually entitled to all the produce? And so when the servants arrive they beat one, stone one and kill one. The landowner sends more servants and they get the same treatment. And when the tenants see that the landowner has sent his son they plot further. "If we kill the son we will take the whole inheritance". And this is what they do.

-  The servants/messengers are the prophets.

In this parable the servants are the prophets that have been calling on the people to listen to God and to turn to God. We can think of Elijah driven into the wilderness^v, Isaiah said to have been sawn in two^{vi}, Zechariah stoned to death^{vii} and John the Baptist beheaded^{viii}.

The tenants rebel against the landowner and attack the servants to protect their position rather than listen to them.

-  The Son is Jesus.

This parable is told by Jesus just shortly after Jesus had entered Jerusalem to cries of Hosanna in the highest^{ix}. But Jesus knows what is coming and so he tells the world's story as he predicts his death because of the rebellion of God's people. Will the son be respected? Jesus knows what awaits him. He is to be taken out of the vineyard and killed.

And so Jesus poses a question to his listeners who include the religious leaders of the day, the chief priests and the elders

⁴⁰ "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

And they respond that the owner will do away with the evil tenants and rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give the owner his share of the crop at harvest time.

And Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes’ [a]?”

Jesus rejected and to be crucified has been rejected but He is the cornerstone.^x

And then He tells the listeners:

⁴³ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” [b]

And we read:

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. ⁴⁶ They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

How would the religious leaders today receive Jesus? How would the world receive Jesus if he came today? How would the religious leaders receive Jesus?

How would we receive Jesus?

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden^{xi}.

The story of the nation of Israel.

The story of Jesus.

And the story of our times.

Think for the moment not just about yourself, or our congregation here at Trinity, but think of our society, our world. Aren’t we living in times where we have lost sight of God? Where we have lost sight of God’s provision and believe that this is our world and that we can control, or destroy, all as we wish. The landowner seems absent. Isn’t it up to us to take what we want? Take what we can no matter the impact on the environment or on those around us? There are more than 152 million people in need of humanitarian assistance globally, at least 64 million have been forced to flee their homes and an estimated 21 million people in forced or coerced human trafficking worldwide.

The cry has changed in many parts of the world from:

“There is a God!”

“Is there a God?”

“There is no God!”

In the parable we don’t get to hear what would have happened had the hi-jacking of the vineyard been completed. But I think we can complete the story. There would no doubt have been disputes amongst the tenants as to who should get the biggest share and there would have been bloodshed to get control of all, or a greater share.

When the harmony between God and his people is broken, the harmony between his people will also be fractured.

We live in Christ rejecting world^{xii}. And the choice we have been given is a yes or a no. Accept or reject. If we accept we need to respond, to bear fruit. Alan concluded his sermon last Sunday saying that “our assurance is grounded in the gospel which in turn liberates us to surrender and to serve gladly”.

At the evening service Jones preached on Titus 1 where Paul lays out to Titus the attributes that we must have as Christian leaders and as Christ followers. Our lives are to reflect the gospel message.

Consider yourself as a tenant in God's vineyard and consider how you can produce good fruit, or more good fruit.^{xiii} The fruit of compassion, simplicity, inclusivity, grace, generosity, and justice.^{xiv} Not just fruit for the sake of fruit but because we are to be God's hands and feet in the world to reconcile the world to God. And remember the purpose of your service is not just to make the world a better place but to show God to the world. Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit to show you how you can make a difference. Spread a little bit of happiness to somebody each day. Small acts of kindness can spread like ripples in a pool to touch many even on distant shores. Pause and search for pride, arrogance, resentment and anything else that may hold you back and then reach out. It may be a phone call that you have been putting off. A word of encouragement, a pause to really listen and understand. A reaching out across the barriers of race, belief and generation. Not to make your point but to reflect God's message to those around you.

Listening is the starting point. Listening to God's word and listening to those around us in God's vineyard.

Gordon Hay
Trinity, Lynnwood
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ⁱ “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 5:7. The vineyard of the LORD Almighty

is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.

ⁱⁱⁱ [Joshua 24:14-28](#)

^{iv} Read Matthew 21:28-32 which records the parable of the Two Sons. 28 “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ 29 “I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. 30 “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. 31 “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

^v [1 Kings 19:4-14](#)

^{vi} Hebrews 11:37. 37 “They were put to death by stoning;[a] they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—“

^{vii} [2 Chronicles 24: 20-21](#)

^{viii} [Mark 6:14-29](#)

^{ix} A writer [Rodney Buchanan](#) puts it like this: What Jesus is doing is telling the world’s story and predicting his own death due to the rebellion of God’s creation.

^x There are a number of passages referring to the cornerstone in the Bible. See: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Cornerstone> . See also Ephesians 2:19-22 New King James Version (NKJV). Christ Our Cornerstone. 19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. See also: 1 Peter 2:7-8. This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone,” and, “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

^{xi} Given everything but wanting more. Living with all of God’s provision - but wanting to be God.

^{xii} Rodney Buchanan refers to the passage in the book by Dostoyefsky. The Brothers Karamasov pages 286 to 302, the chapter on the Grand Inquisitor. He says this: “That is the story of our Christ-rejecting world. It is how we treat the Landowner. And the interesting thing is that both in Dostoyevsky’s story and Jesus’ parable, it is the religious folk who reject Jesus. The Bible says that the Pharisees knew that he was talking about them. They were the religious leaders. Even in the arena of religion God is not welcome. He is too radical. He is too awesome. His person and power are overwhelming. We prefer a god we can understand, control and even manipulate.”

^{xiii} Galatians 5:22-26. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

^{xiv} John van der Laar – Sacredise for 8 October 2017