

SERMON FOR TRINITY 18 2023 | 08.10.23

Isaiah 5: 1-7; Philippians 3: 4b-14; St Matthew 21: 33-46

As some of you will know, I was asked to officiate at the funeral of my cousin Simon on Friday lunchtime, at a very new Crematorium near Cambridge. He was 78 and had really never recovered from being widowed from Mary, the love his life, over nine years ago. As one of his three daughters said, this was his time and I was glad that I managed to visit him the day before he died. The funeral was a real celebration and rightly so.

As is the case in nearly all such situations, the day is peppered with snatched conversations, catching up with people you know – maybe are related to - but actually are people you don't really know that well after all. So I was caught unawares when I picked up on the story of my second cousin Charlotte and her husband Alex, whose daughter is seriously affected by cerebral palsy. It really was a snatched conversation as Alex was kindly dropping me off at the station. But in those six or seven minutes I could hear both his love for his daughter and the searing disappointment that Florence would have to cope with this dreadful condition throughout her life. He talked about her inability to walk unassisted, about the language difficulties, the care demands and the challenges being forced on her teachers at her main stream primary school. I was deeply impressed.

The fact that both he and Charlotte are in the film industry, highly creative, dynamic people, just made the story even sadder as he described how Charlotte has pretty much been forced to give up her career in television.

And it made me think about disappointment – and its bedfellow disillusionment – and the way these two parents are coping.

The stories we have today are not easy. Like all parables they force us to peel away at the meanings like layers of an onion. Both have a vineyard as the backdrop, fantastically well set up by the owner who has lavishly invested in this particular piece of land. It really should do pretty well if it is well looked after. The stock is good, the irrigation systems are all in place: what is there to go wrong? As a parable we can assume that God is the planter and the tenants are the current leaders of Israel. Obvious really.

Except that the vineyard doesn't come up trumps at all. Very soon the place has gone to wrack and ruin and the juice from the vine is so sour it turns everyone's stomach. All the hopes had gone terribly wrong.

And the Old Testament version ends up with the total annihilation of the vineyard – every last branch torn up and burnt. And that’s what we generally expect in life: if something doesn’t work out, then we rip it down and we find the energy to start again. We do it with houses, we do it with the things we cook – and of course we’ve just done it with the HS2 link from Birmingham to Manchester. What we expect is a decent return on all the money and effort we have put into whatever project it is that we started. Surely we are entitled to enjoy the fruits of all our labours? And if that isn’t going to happen then it is probably better to call it quits.

So what is different in the New Testament version of the vineyard story? To start with, it seems pretty similar to the parable in Isaiah although here it isn’t that the vineyard failed to produce a good crop – I think that there were no complaints there – it’s rather that the people in charge think that they have a Baldrick style ‘clever plan’ to steal the property for themselves. By scaring off the rent collectors they think they can make the property their own.

Yet little by little, St Matthew takes us into a new and more profound direction. First he wants us to note the lengths the owner had gone to, to get what was due to him: after the slaves have been beaten up and despite the risks, he sends his one and only son to negotiate with the greedy tenants. But as we read, the risk misfires badly: the tenants kill the son, the heir, hoping that ‘possession would be 9/10ths of the law’. *What we have we hold as the Ulstermen used to say.*

And yes, the punishment comes swiftly: the vineyard is to be leased out to people who have some respect for the owner and the first tenants are to be severely punished.

But then these words from Jesus: *the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. And even more mysteriously This is the Lord’s doing and it is precious in our eyes?*

What is all that about?

Surely no one can think that the killing of the son by the evil tenants was a good thing? In the same way no one would be so cruel as to imagine that the cerebral palsy that Charlotte and Alex’s daughter has to endure is anything but a tragedy?

And yet, in the face of repeated misfortunes, just wiping away all that is wrong in the world is not God's way either. Quick fixes to big problems have never been acceptable which is why the Church speaks so forcefully against abortion, against euthanasia and against capital punishment. Instead we are called to the harder work of peace and reconciliation, not least in the West Bank after yesterday's rocket attacks.

Failure to achieve what we hope for and what we want is not to be counted as defeat and it shouldn't be allowed to set the agenda for the future. Failure in any endeavour is always possible, the result of Adam and Eve thinking that they could go it alone in the Garden of Eden, that they 'knew it all' - that they were not the tenants in the Garden but had somehow managed to make themselves the owners. It was their arrogance and desire to ignore the rules has led to the Biblical narrative from the very beginning: thinking we are in final control is sin.

Then, in the middle of it all, Jesus gives us the picture of a stone, the stone which is heavy enough to smash all our pretensions of being in charge of events. Faced with Florence's cerebral palsy, with all its disappointments and challenges, Charlotte and Alex have begun to discover, in their weakness, a different way of living and loving. Equally, faced with the medicines in Libya we talked about last week, or any of the difficulties that each of us face, each and every day, we too realise our helplessness. We can't iron out the horrid, disagreeable and hurtful things that go on happening; we can't change very much on our own, however much we might like to try.

Uncertainty and change, pain and humility are built into our DNA as tenants in this world. And to survive, to *produce the fruits of the Kingdom* as the Gospel says, requires us to slow down and to ask for the help of the one who ultimately created the world - to seek his help in the face of all the disappointments and all the disillusionments. There cannot be any substitute for spending time, asking God to help us through, to spend time in prayer, acknowledging that we don't have a clue how the future will pan out - but trusting in the knowledge that God is there to hold us by the hand and to bring us safely through.

We are all aware of how good St Paul was at claiming how well connected he had been, how intelligent he was, and how religious. He could (and did!) list all his achievements at the drop of a hat.

But, as he admits, none of these achievements really meant anything. He writes: *yet all this I count as nothing compared with the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I want to know Christ and if that means sharing in his sufferings, so be it, for then I can be certain that I will also be like him.*

So let me finish like this. We all understand that these two parables were directed at the Pharisees and the bad apples of Israel. But they do have a contemporary message too.

As you know, Maria, Sinead and I are beginning to feel the pressure of moving on from St James'. That's hardly surprising after nearly fifteen years here – and over forty for me in full time ministry. This process of dislocation and detachment is not easy and it is not made any easier by a number of unexpected family challenges and the secrecy that goes alongside the Diocesan decision-making processes which is, frankly, wholly unnecessary. I was also sorry to hear that someone in the congregation had felt that the current discussions about the future of the Vicarage were part and parcel of my unwillingness to let go of the house in Arlington Square!

Nothing could be further from the truth; we thought we had done all we could to leave behind the very best base for my successor to use for the work of mission in this parish. No one is more aware than we are that we are tenants! And I am neither disappointed nor disillusioned by these events.

For the truth is that while we have been entrusted with the care of the St James' vineyard in one generation, it is perfectly in order for it to be taken away from us in the next. That is how we learn, as St Paul said, *to forget what lies behind and strain forward for that which lies ahead.*

With God's help – and with yours – I think we can do that. But please be patient with us; it isn't easy.