

Sermon for Proper 22, Year A

The Text: Matthew 21:33-46

Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our heavenly Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Some people have a passion for their vines and their wines. Someone who owns a vineyard loves the place.

It has to be the right place to grow vines. They love the soil. It has to be the right soil to produce the right flavours. They love the vines, those funny knobbly sticks that suddenly spring to life. They love the fresh greenness of the growing vines.

They love to watch the fruit forming, growing, filling out, colouring. They love the vintage, the very busy time of picking the grapes and carting them into the winery.

They love the pressing although not too many do it by treading the grapes with their bare feet any more, but that shows some of the joy of feeling the grapes give up their rich juice.

They love the wine making, blending just the right juices, storing them in barrels while they ferment and mature. They love the tasting, discovering just what sort of a vintage it has turned out to be.

They love sharing the wine, getting others to taste it and tell them what a wonderful job they've done. They love marketing the wine, putting their own label on it and offering it to the world.

There's something about owning a vineyard, growing your own grapes and making your own wine. It brings together so many of the best things of living with the fruitfulness of the earth, and the rich blessings of life.

A genuine owner loves their vineyard and loves their winery. The Bible uses that picture for the way that God loves his people.

We hear from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 5 the love song for the vineyard. It tells of the man who planted his vineyard with great love: and this is how it goes;

*My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug up the soil and cleared away the stones. He planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower so that he could guard it against animals or birds or intruders. He dug a winepress, where he could tread the grapes.*

*When the time came for the vintage he went out to pick the grapes. But it yielded only bad fruit. The grapes were all withered, or sour.*

What had gone wrong? You can feel the anguish of this owner who had invested so much effort into the vineyard. You can feel the pain and disappointment of the man who had put in so much love, and who received nothing in return.

That's how God had gathered and built up his people. Our Psalm says to God: *You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.*

Remember the story of God leading the people out of slavery in Egypt, leading them across the desert under the leadership of Moses, and giving them a land where they could settle and thrive. He called on them to live as his holy people.

But they disappointed God. Again and again they forgot about God. They followed their own ideals and became greedy and corrupt.

Here's the pain of God when his vineyard, his people, let him down: *What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?*

Now God's relationship turns to judgment. He says: *I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and thorns and thistles will grow there.*

The people who have deserted their God will suffer the consequences of their desertion, and the punishment of their rebellion. The love of God becomes the pain of God.

Jesus uses a very similar picture in his parable about the vineyard. In Jesus' parable the landowner does exactly the same: digs up the soil, puts up a wall around the edge, builds a watchtower, and digs a winepress.

But then he has to leave that town, so he rents out the vineyard to some tenants. The rent will be a share of the vintage when it is harvested.

When the time comes he sends his servant to collect the harvest. But the tenants turn on the servants, beat them up, and even kill them.

Now we see the love of the landowner expressed in patience and hopefulness. He sends more servants to complete the mission. But they too are beaten up and murdered.

The landowner loves his vineyard, and he wants to be able to claim its fruit. He decides to send his own son to collect his harvest. He thinks that surely they would respect his son.

But instead of respecting the son or the father, they work out that they can kill the son and heir. And if the landowner has no heir they will be able to seize the vineyard, and own it for themselves.

So when the son arrives they grab him, and drag him out, and murder him.

Jesus asks the people what the landowner should do. They are horrified and angry. *They must be punished and killed. And he should find some other tenants who will do the right thing and who will produce a harvest and hand it over where it belongs.*

*Right*, says Jesus. And he turns to the people who are the religious leaders. *You are those wicked tenants who turn against their benefactor*, he says.

Why? Because they had been entrusted with the spiritual life of their people. God had appointed priests and elders to lead the people in worship, and to teach them to trust God, and to show them how to follow God. They had been called to serve their God and Lord. They had been given positions of trust and responsibility.

And they had taken those positions and used them for their own status and power. They had turned it around and trusted their own goodness, rather than the goodness of God. They sought the honour and glory from the people, rather than giving honour and glory to God. They were the tenants who wanted to be the owners.

God had repeatedly sent prophets to call his people to repentance and faithfulness. The message of the prophets was often a direct challenge to the religious leaders, and it was the religious leaders who rejected the prophets. The prophets were persecuted, and hunted down, and imprisoned, and killed. These were the servants, whom God had sent for the harvest, but who had been beaten and killed.

In this story Jesus is speaking prophetically about himself. When Jesus came, he proclaimed the kingdom of God. He told the people that God's kingdom was coming, and he showed that he was bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth.

The message of Jesus, and the response of the people to Jesus, threatened the self-interest of the religious leaders. They were already plotting how they could get rid of Jesus.

In telling of the landowner who sent his son to collect the harvest, Jesus is telling how his heavenly Father had sent him into the world. He had done so with great love and deep patience and hopefulness.

Surely people who professed faith and loyalty to God would receive God's own Son with devotion and faithfulness? But Jesus knew that the knives were out.

The Gospel says that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that he was talking about them. But instead of hearing this as a warning, they are all the more determined. They are looking for a way to arrest him. The cross is not far away.

And even as they do so, they are condemning themselves. They are the ones who want to seize and control God's kingdom. They are the ones who want the power and the glory for

themselves. They are the ones who are bringing God's own judgement on themselves.

We can think of this parable as a warning to the religious leaders who were there at the time of Jesus.

But we can also hear this parable telling us about the deep love of God for all of his people, and his pain and disappointment whenever people abuse the grace that he gives to them. We can hear this parable as God's warning also to us.

You may or may not appreciate vineyards. You may or may not enjoy the fruit of the vine. But you have been given the opportunity to share in the wonderfully rich and beautiful kingdom of our God.

God is at work, planting, growing, tending, building, and his work is the life process of growth, health, production. The fruit of the vine is a great symbol of the joy and celebration of belonging to the kingdom of our God.

And God has also given us the privilege of working in his vineyard. God has called us to serve in his kingdom. God has entrusted the work of his kingdom to his people on earth. God has appointed us to be his tenants, working for him, and responsible to him.

But with that comes the temptation, to think that the vineyard belongs to us, and to try to get it for ourselves. As soon as we do that we are rebelling against our God. We are taking what belongs to God. We are looking for our glory and our power.

We think that God has gone a long way away, and now we can please ourselves, do what we want, all under the justification of religion.

So in conclusion:

God calls us, entrusts us to work in his vineyard. It is our great privilege to be able to speak God's word, to show God's love, to share in the life of the vineyard, its planting, growing, tending, harvesting, to see the great things that God is doing, also through us.

God has even sent his own Son to us. We welcome him as our Lord and our Saviour. We look at all his has given us, and we pledge to serve with his spirit of love and generosity.

It is always God's harvest, and God's gift of love. Wherever and whenever we see the new life of the kingdom, we give thanks to God, we offer it back to God, and we rededicate ourselves to serving God more and more.

We offer our service to the glory of our Lord. Let the vineyards be fruitful, Lord.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.