

High St Uniting Church Frankston
Fruitful for God Matthew 21:33 - 46



In the allegory of the Christian world that C. S. Lewis created in his Narnia series of stories, God is the Emperor over the Sea; a distant, known but never seen, figure, one that can easily be dismissed or ignored. That is a realistic image for God for many people, and it is a similar image to the one Jesus crafts in this allegorical parable of the vineyard and the tenants – the landlord who has gone to another country. “God is absent, we can do what we like.”

But is this parable a simple allegory at all? It is too easy to read it as an explanation of the transfer of the kingdom from Jews to Christians – the landowner is God, the tenants are the priests and Pharisees, the messengers are the prophets, Jesus is the Son, and the new tenants are the followers of Jesus. Other than some sort of biblical catechism on salvation history, it doesn't seem to make sense as to why it's in scripture at all.

A different message emerges if we look at the cyclic nature of the parable; in the beginning the landowner lets out his vineyard to a group of tenants and at the end he lets out the vineyard to another group of tenants; will the same thing happen again? Instead of reading this parable as a comforting story of the church replacing Israel in the kingdom, it becomes a disconcerting warning to the church that has Jesus looking straight at us and saying, “The vineyard belongs to God, what are you doing to bring in a harvest for God, remember what happened to the previous tenants”.

Most of the commentaries that I consulted for this text had the same take in locating this parable either in the context of Jesus confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders or, Matthew's context of starting a new community and a new church separate from the synagogue. There were warnings in the commentaries to not make the story about the Jews as a whole, appreciating that Matthew himself was Jewish, as was, presumably, a large proportion of his community. This is not a parable addressed to the crowds, it is spoken to the religious leaders who had confronted Jesus in the temple and questioned his authority; and indeed, the leaders recognise that Jesus is aiming this parable at them. Note carefully that it is those religious leaders and not Jesus, who picture the owner of the vineyard, God, as a harsh authoritarian who will put the tenants to death. Jesus doesn't agree with that image of God, just that God will take the kingdom away from the religious leaders of Israel. Other commentaries pointed the themes and concepts of this parable all coming from the history and scripture of Israel, so the hearers would have known what Jesus was talking about; the vineyard is a common image in the prophets. Valuable insights into the parable, but still insights located and fixed in the first century. Is this just a story to make the early church feel satisfied that they were now the people of the kingdom? A little smugness that God is now on their side. No.

Matthew was writing to his community in a tone of warning and not congratulation. Our ancestors didn't produce the fruits of God's vineyard; they ignored and killed the prophets, and even ignored and killed the Son of God, so they could run the vineyard their way; don't let us make the same mistakes. This is a parable directly aimed at the church, particularly, and I say this somewhat uncomfortably, aimed at the leaders of the church. “Hear the call of the prophets, recognise the Son of God, and produce the fruits of the kingdom.” We are the ones called to hear the prophets and respect the Son. This is a parable that speaks to every generation – the kingdom is God's vineyard, and each generation is expected to produce a

crop of the fruits of the kingdom for God – justice, mercy, peace, love, and faith.

The history of the church is full of examples where the church forgot this parable and went after other “fruit”, power, authority, judgement, or simply social position. These are distortions that come from either ignoring the call of the prophets to justice and mercy over religious practice, or from ignoring the Son as the image of God – forgiving, inclusive, strong but humble service and willing sacrifice even to the point of death. Not real stoning and killing of the prophets as in the parable, and not really killing the Son, as in the parable, but certainly metaphorically killing them, ignoring and silencing the uncomfortable messages of forgiving as we were forgiven, accepting as we were accepted, denouncing judgement and denouncing wealth, and giving generously as we have been generously blessed.

And there have been periods of the church’s history when it forgot about producing fruit at all; and that is one of the traps that the church is in now. The church community can become so inward looking and interested only in the needs and wants of the community, that the fruit of the kingdom becomes an unknown concept. One of the criticisms of the Act2 process that the Uniting Church is going through, is that it is all about us rather than the call of God. It’s all about form rather than function. More than just about mission focus or meeting needs, producing the fruit of the kingdom is about attitudes and open welcome and hospitality.

There are so many parables and allegories in scripture about vineyards and vines and fruit, both in the Old Testament and the New, and they all point us away from ourselves to serving the world in the name of God. The vineyard has a purpose and so we have a purpose. Some of the epistles give us lists of the “fruits of the Spirit” – love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – however, the context of those passage is about love in the community. The epistles can be read as simply the way to live in a Christian community; the call of the prophets and the message of Jesus – justice and mercy and humbly walking with God – shifts that to be about how we are to live within the whole community.

“The word of the Lord is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.”

We cannot just leave scripture as stories from the past with only some moral application now; the word of God is living and active and relevant. Jesus and Matthew spoke to their communities, but the word carries on speaking. The tenants are not just the Jews, the vineyard is not just Israel, the prophets are not just the Old Testament preachers. This parable presents us with the call to realise that the church we are part of, and the faith that we profess, are expressions of God’s kingdom that has a purpose in the world. We are temporary tenants who owe God the produce of the kingdom – justice, mercy, peace, faith, and humble service.