

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Good morning. Today I'd like to provide a bit more information than usual on the context of the day's gospel reading which includes a well-known parable. It's clear that Jesus is using this occasion to criticize "the temple leadership responsible for proper care of the people of God," but there is a good deal more to what is going on here than a straightforward critique. For example, Matthew's account "tells in allegorical form the main events in the dealings of God with his people: covenant, prophecy, the coming of Christ, the crucifixion, the church." Sometimes, familiarity with a passage can make it more difficult to explore these levels of meaning.

Some authorities have suggested that this parable may have had its origins in an historical event, one which would have been within the memory of those listening to the story retold by Jesus. That event was the revolt of Judas of Galilee, a leader of the Jewish people who led an uprising in 6 A.D. against the census imposed for Roman tax purposes by Quirinius in Judea province. Judas of Galilee encouraged Jews not to register; those that did had their houses burnt and their cattle stolen by his followers. This was one of several events leading up to the Jewish War with Rome in 66-70 A.D. which resulted in the burning of the Temple and the dispersal of Israel into the far corners of the Mediterranean basin in what is called the Diaspora. Judas is referred to in The Acts of the Apostles in which a member of the Sanhedrin identifies Judas as the leader of a failed Messianic movement.

Since the time of the revolt of Judas of Galilee there had been considerable unrest and economic uncertainty in Galilee and beyond. It was not unusual for large tracts of land which had been seized by foreigners to be the source of political discontent. In fact, "all the conditions were present under which refusal of rent might be the prelude to murder and the forcible seizure of land by the peasantry." Thus, the parable "so far from being an artificially constructed allegory, may be taken as evidence of the kind of thing that went on in Galilee during the half century preceding the general revolt of 66 A.D."

The parable begins with the image of a vineyard planted by a householder. Our Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah "provides this metaphor whereby it is made clearly evident that God is the owner of the vineyard and the people of Israel are the tenants." The passage from Isaiah tells us that "the vineyard of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry!"

By way of further explanation, if the parable is "anchored in history", then upon the death of the owner of property, it would revert to the original owners, and often in Palestine it had previously been wrested from local ownership by foreign invaders. Culturally, "the leasing of land to tenant farmers was a common experience in the first century. Landowners could expect tenants to turn over a portion of the

crop (and) those who failed to meet the landowner's standards would be removed from the land and landowning elite could usually pay others to remove them forcefully if necessary."

In Matthew's version of the parable, which appears also in Mark and Luke, there appears to have been an attempt in recounting the parable to "link the first sending of servants with the former O.T. prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), the second sending with the latter prophets (the major ones being Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the minor ones numbering another 12), and the sending of the son with the coming of Christ." In an honor and shame culture, "the landowner's decision to send his son as emissary was appropriate since he could expect proper respect for his appointed heir."

But the more important thing here is that "the son's first being cast out and then killed parallels the execution of Jesus outside the city walls." Matthew includes a twist on the story as told by Mark and Luke in providing a citation from Psalm 118 in which the abused son became "the stone that the builders rejected." In this way, the story was no longer about the vineyard, the produce, or the tenant farmers. Now, Jesus turned attention toward the abused son: "they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him." The stone the builders rejected thus becomes the top cornerstone; "it wouldn't fit anywhere else in the building, but it will go in the place of greatest honor. And the stone will crush anything that collides with it. He is the Stone, the Messiah, God's anointed; he has come to bring into being the kingdom of God." Certainly, this would account for the ending of our passage which tells us that the Pharisees and chief priests saw very clearly that Jesus was speaking about them and "they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet."

If the parable is indeed "an allegory of God's dealings with his people", we learn in the story that when the son is killed, "the tenants will be put to death, just as Jesus will be crucified, Jerusalem destroyed, and the Gentiles will replace the Jews as God's people." From the perspective of Jesus, he was to be "rejected by those he had come to but was destined to be vindicated by God." That the tenants will be put to death and Jerusalem destroyed refer, of course, to the outcome of the disastrous Jewish War with Rome in the period 66-70 A.D. The idea of the replacement of the Jews by the Gentiles would, of course, have shocked and horrified the Pharisees and chief priests.

As to the overall interpretation of the parable, a number of things need to be emphasized. First, this is "the most revealing parable about Jesus' own sense of his role in God's purposes and was a precipitating factor leading to his arrest." Second, the parable does not teach that God has rejected Israel. The story is directed against *the leaders*, not the whole people, and it is unfair to make it say something else, particularly something that could be used to slander the Jewish people and result in their mistreatment as exemplified in the long and horrific history of anti-Semitism in Christian history. But it is also useful to view the parable as being fundamentally "about *response*." That is to say, "will people respond to the claims God has on their lives or reject his messengers in favor of their own agenda?" What the parable

asserts is “the privilege of living in covenant relation with God” while recognizing that privilege always brings with it *responsibility*. And this is a . Contrary to what we might hope for, “God will judge and will achieve his purposes, and people will be held accountable.” The entire story of the life and mission of Jesus Christ requires our acknowledgement that Jesus “comes as one who is more than a prophet, one in intimate relation with God”, and (therefore) our response to him will determine the degree of our involvement in His Kingdom.

Almighty God, pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen

Sources

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