

A new story (Matthew 21:33-46)

One of the daily routines of having a small child is reading the story before bedtime. It was the part of the evening that I really looked forward to ...

Rebecca or Charlotte would choose which story to read. And often it would be the same book. I'd try and encourage them to choose something new, but they wanted the same one they had the previous night, and the night before ... (I am sure that they knew the story better than me.)

When Jesus began the parable in today's passage, his listeners would have recognised it. "We've heard this one before," they'd have thought. Because it starts the same way as Isaiah 5, when the prophet tells the story of the unfruitful vineyard - complete with wine press and watchtower. His audience would have thought Jesus was going to talk about some dark event of the past, one that everyone would have been familiar with, but this time it was going to have a happy ending, because things are different now.

Except Jesus doesn't! Isaiah in his story condemned the religious leaders of his day. Now Jesus takes his parable one stage further, challenging not only the chief priests and elders but also those who follow them. (Don't forget that Jesus is telling this parable in the temple. If he was going to make an impact with his words anywhere, it was here.)

So any familiarity has gone, any comfort is out the window. This isn't a bedtime story to settle you.

According to Tom Wright (who used to be the Bishop of Durham), "Israel is the vineyard, her rulers the vineyard keepers; the prophets are the messengers, Jesus is the Son; Israel's God, the creator, is himself the owner and the father." And now is the time of crisis - the tenants can't tell the owner what to do. In terms of the covenant or the relationship between God and God's own people - God doesn't follow the people's will, rather the people exist by the will and grace of God.

For the original listeners, it was a summons and a call to action for the priests and Pharisees to whom Jesus is speaking. It demands an openness to a new covenant, which may mean taking the risk of putting aside cherished and longheld ideas. Something new and different is taking place. And that involves everyone!

To a greater or lesser extent, we can make connections between the parable and today for us, our community and our world. Covid-19 is an ongoing time of crisis. We read it, watch it and hear it on the news each day, as those in authority do their best to manage the situation. It has changed what we do and how we do things - whether it is meeting friends and family, travelling, shopping and even church. We yearn for stability and reassurance, of some return to a familiar way of doing things (ie normality). Yet we are unsure what will happen next week or month.

Yet in the crisis, there is Jesus - the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Our church, our services may be different, but our cornerstone (or foundation) on which everything is based remains Christ. And that what will be, will be marvellous or amazing in our eyes.

Sunday 4th October 2020

There is a sense that the old story is no more. We are invited not to look back to the old normal, but to look on and forward to a new normal and a new story. One that is still being created. We are called to be faithful because there is a place in that new story for us, as we display the fruits of God's kingdom. A new chapter with us in it.

And in time, that new story will be as reassuring and comforting as the old.

Prayer for the Week

May we live in faith,
act in righteousness,
always be loved
and make Jesus, the Christ,
the cornerstone of our lives. Amen.
