

Sunday 8th October – Rev Alison Bruton

Readings: Isaiah 5: 1-7; Matthew 21: 33-46

When I think about vineyards my mind goes to the visits Jon and I have made in Europe where we saw the hillsides covered in vines that are clearly very fruitful going by the wines that the regions produced. However, as you might notice from this image vineyards now exist much closer to home and these pictures are from Halpenny Green, around 7 miles from where we are now. If you do enjoy wine, I can thoroughly recommend what they produce, and the vineyard and its surrounding buildings make for a great afternoon out. However, while it might look like I'm acting as a promotional agent for Halpenny Green, my visits there proved quite helpful when I was looking at the passages we have before us this morning.

Although there are differences between the vineyard in Isaiah and that in the parable, there are some similarities, for example, the references to the winepress and the watchtower which we see in both passages. But it is there that the similarity ends I think, although it seems clear that when Jesus was speaking his hearers might well have been expected to bring the Isaiah passage to mind.

In Isaiah, despite the care lavished on the vineyard the fruit it produced was not as was hoped for. The Hebrew word for 'wild grapes' can also be translated as 'worthless things'. This is helpful as it indicated that rather than the grape variety changing from the original cultivated version, the cultivated vines had produced worthless fruit. This resulted in the owner giving up on his useless vineyard and allowing it to return to being waste land, despite the time, energy and commitment that had been devoted to it in order to make it fruitful. In its original context, the song of the vineyard was a clear prophetic message to God's people Israel, that if they continued as they were there could only be one outcome, that is they would turn back into wasteland and that God's loving care would be withdrawn.

Coming now to our parable, as Jesus was speaking and his hearers' thoughts turned to that well known passage in Isaiah; how does Jesus turn the thoughts of his hearers from a message of ultimate devastation to one that holds out hope for those who are seeking to be fruitful for God's kingdom?

It seems clear from the outset in the parable that the owner is committed to ensuring the fruitfulness of his property. In verse 33 we see the verbs: 'planted...put...dug...built...leased...went', all attributed to activities of the owner. Everything that happens there is as a result of his ownership, but he exercises his rights with care and respect, unlike the farmer or the 'rich fool' we heard about last week. Not only does the owner go to great lengths to care for his vineyard, but he trusts the tenants to be responsible in his absence. He does not stand over them and exercise close supervision, he went away and left them with their task. In the same way God pays us the compliment of entrusting us with his work but in doing so he ensures that we have the equipment and skills to be effective in his service.

So, not only does God trust the tenants, but he is also patient with them. He did not react with violence when one messenger had been ill-treated and abused. Rather, he gave the cultivators chance after chance to respond to his appeal. In the same way God bears with us and, as we saw from the story of Peter that we looked at a few weeks back, God brings us back to the point of our sin and then takes us past it, providing reassurance and forgiveness.

But when the owner does go away the tenants decide to almost re-write their tenancy agreement and to steal what has only been entrusted to them and not given to them. They think that somehow

killing the owner's son would mean that they would get their hands on his inheritance, namely the vineyard. Really? Now I'm no legal expert but as far as I'm aware inheritance doesn't work like that. Clearly the tenants have the notion that killing the son will enable them to own the property, or at least take possession of it. But this demonstrates a total misunderstanding of the legal position, the son would have inherited the property from his father, and it would certainly not have been passed on to the tenants on his death. The tenants are always going to be accountable to the owner in the same way that we are always accountable to God for the ways we have carried out the tasks he has given us to do. We cannot escape that responsibility; we are not working in our own vineyard but in the one that God has entrusted to us to care for.

I suspect that if we reflect on the behaviour of the tenants in this parable, we might be able to identify this kind of behaviour in ourselves when we sometimes disregard the place of God in our lives and essentially take the view that 'it's my life and I'll live it as I please.' But we remain accountable to God, and he patiently trusts us to produce good fruit for his Kingdom.

If we look on to the end of the parable we see that the wicked tenants do come to a sorry end and that the owner, after a lengthy period of patience, takes the tenancy away from them and it given to others who will be fruitful, and, given the reaction of the chief priests Pharisees who heard what was being said, they clearly understood that they were being characterised as the wicked tenants in the story.

Stepping back a little and taking an overview of both of our vineyard stories, we can perhaps spot a clear distinction between them in terms of the behaviour of the owners. Isaiah's planter destroys the vineyard out of anger because it produced worthless fruit. The owner in Jesus' parable displays incredible patience and trust. God's steadfast commitment to us, his trust in us and his patience with us demonstrate his undying love for us and should provoke gratitude and not sinful behaviour. Jesus is clearly interested in whether we are committed to living fruitful lives, and if we accept God's sovereignty, we will then have a better chance of loving God and our neighbour as we ought, and in doing so produce the good fruit of changed lives.

This then is the message of hope that emerges as we move from the scene of hopelessness we see in Isaiah and also in the demise of the wicked tenants. Perhaps we are the new tenants that are referred to in verse 41 of our Gospel reading. We are the ones that our patient God trusts to use the gifts he has given us to produce fruit for his Kingdom, as we live for him day to day, sharing the forgiveness and hope we have with all those we meet day to day in our families, neighbourhoods, local shops, health centres, schools and wherever we go.

Perhaps a question to reflect on this morning might be: 'How fruitful am I being for God's Kingdom?'