

TFTD 2025.32 Thursday April 10th

The vineyard: Luke 19.45—20.19



Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, ‘It is written, “My house shall be a house of prayer”; but you have made it a den of robbers.’ Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

So what happens next? Jesus has entered the city and been welcomed by the people as God’s coming king. Just like the village people in Galilee, the crowds thronging the streets of Jerusalem are spellbound by his words. He’s a popular hero. But the greater his popularity with the people, the greater the threat to the sitting tenants who control the levers of power. Like oppressive regimes the world over, the authorities close ranks to eliminate any challenge to their authority.

It starts with a question: ‘Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?’ Jesus counters with another question, knowing that his popular supporters are all around him ready to cheer: ‘I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ This was more difficult: John was also a popular hero, and the people would be quick to retaliate against any insult to his memory. It’s also a quiet reminder, to those who were there, of the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism: You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased (Luke 3.22). That’s where Jesus’ authority actually came from.

He began to tell the people this parable: ‘A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent

a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

Instead of producing an official permit, Jesus tells another story — the last in the series of parables Luke has included in his gospel, and in many ways the most revealing. The opening words already say something about where Jesus is coming from. *A man planted a vineyard* would immediately remind the audience of one of the Bible's best-known parables, from Isaiah 5.1-7: *My beloved had a vineyard in a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines ... He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes.* Everybody listening would know this parable: it comes with the prophetic authority of Isaiah, and it carries a warning: *For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished garden; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*

But Jesus' version of the vineyard parable has a twist. In Isaiah, it's the vineyard which disappoints its owner by failing to produce good fruit. But in Jesus' parable, there's nothing wrong with the vineyard: it's the farmers who cause the problem. These are clearly tenant-farmers who lease the vineyard and contract to pay their rent out of the produce of the vines. They are not the owners of the vineyard, but stewards contracted to work the land on the owner's behalf. It was a pattern that was familiar in Jesus' world. In terms of the parable (which is addressed to 'the people'), it would make the listeners ask: "If the vineyard is us, and the owner is God, who are these 'tenant-farmers' who are supposed to be helping us to produce fruit for God?" To anyone used to de-coding parables, the answer was plain: this parable is not about the people but about the failures of the management (v.19).

And their behaviour is nothing short of shocking: a crescendo of insult and injury. Instead of handing over the expected produce when the owner sends his servant to collect the rent, the tenants *beat him and sent him away empty-handed.* And it gets worse! *Next he sent another slave; that one also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third; this one also they wounded and threw out.*

So the owner of the vineyard has been both defrauded and insulted. He has every right to get rid of the unsatisfactory tenants; more, he has every right to be angry, and to take decisive action to restore his damaged honour. That's what happens in Isaiah's parable, and that's what Jesus' hearers would expect at this point — and it's what eventually happens, as a consequence of the tenants' violent actions. But before that, the owner makes a surprise move, against all expectations:

Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

In his wonderful book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (SPCK 2008), Kenneth Bailey tells a story which brings out how extraordinary the owner's decision is. In the early 1980s, King Hussein of Jordan was told of a group of army officers planning a coup against him. His security chiefs were all for surrounding the barracks and arresting the plotters. But King Hussein told them to hold off for 24 hours. Then he got into his private helicopter, flew to the barracks, and landed on the roof. Telling his pilot to fly away if he heard gunfire, he walked down, alone and unarmed, and surprised the plotters.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalize your plans to overthrow the government and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way, only one man will die." After a moment of stunned silence, the rebels as one rushed forward to kiss the king's hand and pledge loyalty to him for life. By choosing total vulnerability, the king acted nobly and in so doing fanned into flame the dying embers of the rebels' sense of honour.

Like many of the parables, this one works at more than one level. On the surface, it's a salutary warning to the authorities — indeed, to anyone who holds a stewardship role in God's kingdom — that leadership does not give you *carte blanche* to do what you like with the heritage you have been entrusted with. It's a sacred charge to work with the vineyard to produce fruit for the glory of God. God places himself and the work of his kingdom totally in our hands. It's an awesome responsibility, not an opportunity for self-enrichment.

But at a deeper level, it's a story about the vulnerability of God, standing as a fitting introduction to the passion narrative. The Beloved Son chooses the path not of violence but of vulnerability. This is a parable about incarnation, about the self-emptying love of a God who will take any risk to save his people — the love that will lead to the cross.

God bless, Loveday

