

*+ In the name of God, Life Giver, Pain Bearer, Spirit of Truth and Grace. Amen.*

Some years ago, when I was just beginning to realise my calling to be a priest, our family lived in a large villa type house in Croydon in the western suburbs of Adelaide. We rented the house from an Italian man who was our landlord. The house was great – it had verandahs all the way around it, large rooms on the inside, and a huge palm tree in the front yard which could be seen from one end of the street to the other. One of the things we didn't like however, was the grape vines which were criss crossed overhead on trellises all across the back yard.

The vines were heavy and oppressive, and because they were mostly grapes for making wine, they weren't that nice to eat. And the vines required a lot of maintenance. Several times in the growing season the landlord would come in and douse the grapes with sulphur, which was absolutely revolting. It got on everything, ruined the washing, and it stunk. At grape picking time the landlord would let himself in and strip the vines, which took a couple of days. At the end of the season he would come in and prune the vines, which also took ages.

It was a nightmare to live in that house. The vines were the dominant feature and we as tenants had to put up with a landlord coming into the property at will, taking the produce and maintaining the vines. If we had realised the vines would be so consuming when we lived in that house, we would never have moved in. It was one of the more unhappier phases of our family life, and although we had to move into a very small house afterward to get away, we were so glad to be free of the vines.

Consequently, I do have sympathy for tenants renting houses, and for their rights, and especially for their privacy – although the more recent experience of dealing with tenants in the church rectory has been an interesting inversion of my vineyard experience.

In the parable today, and in other parts of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses the vine and the vineyard to describe Israel in relationship to God. The situation is of course not the same as when I was leasing the house in Croydon, but every time the gospel relates the vine and vineyard to the kingdom of God I have to separate for myself our experience of the vine and the unpleasantness I associate with it, especially in relation to tenants and landlords, with what Jesus is trying to teach. And that's the challenge for me in this gospel, and for you it's probably different – but nonetheless there's always something we learn and can be transformed by in Jesus' words.

I struggle in this parable with imagining the landlord, or the owner of the vineyard, as God, which I think is the allegory here presented, because I think about the landlord in Croydon who made our lives miserable. It's a painful process to live out the idea that we were the wicked tenants. Of course, we didn't beat the landlord or his representatives, which were in fact his own son and son in law and grandson, but we didn't have a lot of money and we struggled to pay the high rent. And neither was that landlord an absentee, which was the case in the gospel. In the parable the tenants actually had charge over managing the crop and as tenant farmers, they were to hand over the produce to the landowner at harvest time. We were just there while the produce was taken away.

In the system of an absentee landowner, the tenants managed the land and were entitled to a small portion of the produce, enough only just to feed and keep the family. The real wealth went to the urban dwelling landowner, who was of the wealthier class, who would have enjoyed a much more comfortable style of life than the ones who managed the land.

Perhaps the tenant farmers in this story were poor, and the system of delivering the produce of the harvest to the landowner made them even more impoverished. It must

have been a good producing farm, because the owner even went to the extent of putting in a watch tower, which would have been for security purposes.

So, what is Jesus saying in this story? There must be something in the association of the landowner with God, and the tenants with those who are impeding the work of God in the world. This is a story designed to relate familiar social and working realities with the deeper implications of the kingdom of God. It is in terms that people of Jesus' time would know and understand. For us it takes a bit more work because the social dynamics are so much different now.

In those days there was a vast inequality of wealth, with the very small minority of landowning people having the larger proportion of wealth, and the majority of people being extremely poor and having to work for and rely on the wealthy for the means to live. The closest we get here in privileged Australia today is imagining how people in third world countries struggle to live, who have inadequate resources, lack of education and medicine and limited material comforts, and who give over to the wealthy nations much of their money to pay off debts and buy into the global economy, the economy which in this year of 2020 and the effects of the pandemic is in ruin.

In the parable, the ones coming to ask for the produce are representatives of the landowner. I think Jesus is asking us to imagine they are prophets sent from God. The tenants are the people of Israel who have become self focussed and greedy. They have forgotten their responsibilities in honouring God and in giving the fruits of the harvest to God in order that the kingdom of God be built up. The tenants have killed the prophets, they have attempted to silence God and to keep the vineyard for themselves. The watch tower and fence around the land help them to feel secure and separated from God.

We are not so different today. We build up things to separate us from God. We consume our lives with other things, which represent fences, and we guard ourselves from intruders. If we don't listen to the ones who come representing God, we may be cut off and crushed by the weight of things which bear us down. For me it's like the weight of the vines in the house at Croydon.

In the gospel Jesus is of course the one sent from God, the inheritor of the vineyard, and the Pharisees and chief priests wanted to keep him out, silence him. He is the cornerstone in bringing about the kingdom of God, and upon him will be built the whole weight of the word of God.

I think that in our time we might read this parable and be open to listen to the word of God, that we might unbuild the fences we have built up against the bearers of that word, and that we might be generous in giving back to God the produce that we have reaped in our work and in our lives. Let us not keep all that we have to ourselves. Let us honour God and all that God gives to us to care. Let us not forget that we have been made custodians of this world, of the vineyard, and that it is not ours by right. It belongs to God, and we are to hand over the fruits for the purpose of God's work and open the gates to the messengers of God.