

***The judgement feared is the one needed***

*[Jesus said] "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

*"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son', he said.*

*"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.*

*"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

*"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end", they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time".*

*Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:*

*"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?*

*"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (Matthew 21:33-46)*

There's no sidestepping the matter of judgement despite every attempt at doing so. As an academic proposition we would all agree – a just judgement is important for living because you can't let evil or injustice have the final say. All the world's cries of "It's not right!" or "That's just not fair!" have justice as a foundation which is meaningless unless there is a judgement, a verdict, a reckoning. We all know the consequences when there are no consequences – chaos and destruction, fear and arrogance, the survival of the fittest and the ethic of fang and claw.

So when Jesus is in the temple in the week before his crucifixion and he's challenging religious authority and making claims that scandalise, all the while telling parables that divide his hearers – no one disputes that what he's saying about the landowner who has left his vineyard in the hands of tenants who won't pay their rent and worse than that assault and kill his servants and then make it really personal when they murder the land owner's son is right. We can even understand revenge here but justice will suffice and the hearers have no qualms about justice coming to the tenants; they clearly answer Jesus' question – all are in agreement. "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end", they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time".

King David said something similar when he heard the prophet Nathan's story about the rich man who took and killed the poor man's only lamb. "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity." (2 Samuel 12:5b,6)

The problem comes when Nathan turns around and says to David, "You are the man!" (the rich man). And Jesus has a similar effect because he quotes Scripture (Psalm 118 – our introit for today) in such a way – his teachings have a cumulative effect – so that the chief priests and the Pharisees knew he was talking about them and so they wanted to arrest him but were afraid of the people because they regarded Jesus as a prophet.

Judgements are important in this world – as long as that are about everyone else – for when it comes to us, our tendency is either to fight the charges or plead mitigating circumstances. We can easily imagine the religious authorities gnashing their teeth against Jesus – protected, it seems, by the crowd whom we imagine enjoyed having Jesus stick it to them. Yet it is sobering to consider that a few days later the crowd is also buying for his blood. Did they also realise somehow that Jesus' judgements will also come upon them?

Today it is not pc to talk about God's judgements. I suspect many Christians cringe at the Christian on the street corner with the sandwich board with something like 'Repent and be saved – don't and you will burn!'. When the world accepted and agreed upon the world view about judgements, rewards, and punishments then

perhaps such scatter gun messages might have an effect but in a post modern world of relativism with people creating their own version of right and wrong, then the notion of one judgement under which all people will come is regarded as arrogant to say the least. I hear versions of it in the church when someone says that God approves of their behaviour which seems to go against Scripture with a phrase such as “Its ok, Jesus and I have a special understanding”.

We should not be surprised at these and other responses to the words of judgement because our nature rebels at the whole concept. Me? Under judgement? Who thinks they can tell me what to do? And yet God certainly does through his word. “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:22b,23). “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Our human nature is expert at judgement dodging and sin minimisation so that we can easily become blinded to God’s perspective on things.

Jesus taught a great deal in the temple in the week before crucifixion; teaching the religious, those who could easily spot sin in others to get a new perspective, God’s perspective. It stung and hurt and challenged – it caused anger and frustration. God’s law always does. The sick who know they are sick receive the doctor and his medicine; those who don’t believe they are ill, need to be convinced first of the diagnosis.

After 2000 years, today’s churches can easily fall into the trap of respectability – those who attend are regarded as ‘good’ and those who are sinners wouldn’t usually be seen there; and it seems that if a person was crushed with shame or struggling with sin (even if its described in other terms) it would be unusual today to see them at church saying ‘help me’ but they will go to a doctor or therapist or a support group (not necessarily bad in themselves) but not able to provide true relief from the burden of shame and guilt and ongoing struggles with sin and weakness.

Jesus’ parable adds a dimension to sin – often regarded as weakness, something that entraps us, addiction-like, that which can mitigate our responsibility – by pointing out that the tenants had choices. They chose their course of action – repeatedly. The dimension of sin we all don’t like to encounter is the dimension of disobedience and rebellion. We would like to excuse our actions when judged but the charge of rebellion cuts deep.

In our Lutheran talk about saint and sinner, I think we conceptualise it as good v bad and we’re on the side of ‘good’ because we are baptised and in Christ. And Christians are saints through faith in Christ. But the sinner is not an anonymous foe; a shrouded figure who pushes God’s hand away, who swims back to the surface of the baptismal water and wants to drown the new creation in Christ, who never shows his face. The sinner is also us; the one who puts himself into temptation, who rejects God’s warning because the sin is too seductive or pleasurable, who is lazy and likes the power of the moment, who justifies his actions by saying that he’ll repent tomorrow or that others are far worse than him. Such is the face of rebellion. All sin is ultimately a sin against God and his place in reality and especially our lives. And God will break and crush those who come up to him with any attempt at self justification or sin minimisation or people comparison; that is not the fruit he is looking for.

Of course Jesus gave hope in the parable by talking about the stone that the builders rejected becoming the corner stone for the solid foundations or the capstone that holds the arch in place. God would help his people through the one they have rejected. And we know that is Jesus himself who was, shortly after he told this parable, crucified. The people did what by nature we all want to do with God’s judgement on us – kill God!

And yet Jesus wouldn’t stay dead and his resurrection brought with it not the fear of people who tried to kill God and lost and thus are just waiting for God’s killing blow of wrath but rather relief and joy at his message of forgiveness and new life! This Gospel is a life event – a new birth, a new home, a new meal, a new lifestyle (a new commandment I give to you: love one another). The Gospel is a promise that keeps head butting us as we still live in this world. And this means struggling with sin that plagues and haunts us and especially with those sins that don’t. It is not a matter of struggling our way to heaven but as the Gospel shines into our lives we see more and more to struggle with and over – and in that struggle, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we live as forgiven sinners, seeking to make the lives of those around us better. Forgiven sinners – no other description better describes us in this world.