

Sermon preached at OCC, 8 September 2023

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.*

Matthew 21:33-46

### ***The vineyard and the stone***

The election day is just around the corner. Visions, promises, and hopeful outlooks abound. Regardless of parties, leaders and candidates are making great efforts to reach out to the voters to win over their hearts. While I was preparing this sermon, I couldn't help but imagine that the vineyard is like New Zealand; the tenants – present or past alike are somehow politicians who must produce good fruits on demand of the landowner – the voters. However, in this scenario, we can't confidently tell which tenants are good or bad, who are the servants of the owner(s), who is the son, etc. Scholars say that the parable of the wicked tenants is one of the most significant, most discussed, and most complicated parables, and not surprisingly, the debate continues. One of the reasons is quite apparent – as you may have noticed, the passage is roughly divided into two parts: the parable of wicked tenants and Q&A is one part (vv 33-41), and the stone part together with the religious leaders' hostile reaction to it (vv 42-46) makes the other. If we read this parable as a whole, the stone part doesn't fit in the parable and the Q&A part. But a careful and diligent look may lead us to vv 38 & 39 – the murder of the owner's son; that's where we find some clue for the whole meaning of the parable and why the religious leaders reacted with hostility, and why it gives warning not only to leadership but the believers in the church.

### ***The wicked tenants in the vineyard***

Most scholars agree that this parable can be read allegorically, which we can quickly identify. For instance, the vineyard is Israel, or the Temple depends on the context; the vineyard's owner is God, the servants are the prophets, and the son is Jesus. The parable also appears in Mark and Luke with the same accounts and context. That is, a man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants. Sometime later, the owner sent a servant or servants to collect his portion of the fruits. However, the tenants rejected his request and abused the servants. He tried again, only to get the same result. Eventually, he sent his son, thinking the tenants would respect him. But they killed the son to take the vineyard for themselves. Now Jesus asks the listeners what the

owner will do, and the answer is the judgment that he will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to other tenants.

The listeners of this parable understood that this was a story about God and God's people. Especially for Matthew, it is one of three parables that would mark the stubbornness of the Jewish leadership: the Two Sons, the Wicked Tenants, and the Wedding Feast. In all three parables, obedience or disobedience to an authoritative figure mattered, who was a father, a vineyard owner, and a king respectively as the symbol of authority in Jesus' time.

As such, a question was raised about Jesus' authority and teaching in the Temple if he was a legitimate figure to do such a thing. Instead of directly answering that question, Jesus told the parable of the two Sons and then the parable of the wicked tenants. They even answered Jesus' question about a possible action that the owner might take against these wicked tenants. They responded only to reveal their disobedience to God while missing the parable's point – what God was doing through Jesus. Till that moment, they would conclude that someone was interfering with God's purposes for his people, not knowing the identity of the tenants. Only when Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22 – “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” an idea about the tenants dawned on them.

### ***The cast-out stone from the vineyard***

The identity of the son and the way he was killed in this parable holds a clue to understanding this parable. The son is not merely part of the machinery of the story, for his coming and the tenants' treatment of him create a crisis. If the story were simply about the patience of God, continually sending servants would be enough. With the son's coming, something significant happens. As the listeners reply, remedial work, such as simply replacing the wicked tenants with other tenants, won't resolve the real issue.

Jesus's citation of Psalm 118:22-23 (v42) helps the listeners, including us, refocus the discussion. The issue is no longer the old 'vineyard' but a new structure of which Jesus himself is the 'cornerstone.' That new structure is God's reign or kingdom, which Jesus has been proclaiming from the beginning of his ministry, which the church will continue to proclaim in Jesus' name. The parable doesn't show the surprising nature and qualities of God's reign. Instead, it focuses on the futile maintenance of the status quo of the Temple back then as well as the present church. So, the parable is not only for those in leadership but also for all persons.

In addition, the parable shows that God will judge and achieve God's purposes, and people will be held accountable. So, what does it mean to us today?

The parable makes us examine ourselves in depth to see if we are good tenants entitled to grow fruits in God's vineyard if we cling onto an old vineyard while casting out a stone that could be the headstone of a new building. We watched a short story titled *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* in our story time. The missing piece tries very hard to meet a perfect match with it; indeed, it encounters such an ideal match. As time goes by, the missing piece begins to grow, and eventually, they part and go separate ways as the missing piece doesn't fit in the other piece perfectly. Then, it meets *the Big O*, who doesn't need or seek anything. Taking *The Big O's* advice, the missing piece eventually becomes the being it aspires to be. The question was, "What made the missing piece grow?" The relationship with the other piece enabled it to grow. Although their separation was sad, the missing piece learned to become whole, like *the Big O*. With the parable of the Wicked Tenants, each story has its turning point that would change the course of action decisively. They are the moment the wicked tenants killed the son, the moment when the missing piece realizes it doesn't fit in the other piece and the election day when the present government is to be evaluated by voters. The three share the same point: God's kingdom works for the fruits/great harvest or fulfilment. As such, it is not static but dynamic, and it's not settled in one place, but it always moves on the way.

As for the church, this is a scary warning. Still, there is something we learn from it. As a local Christian community implementing Jesus' ministry here and now, the parable tells us that we should not be afraid of failure by trying new things. Instead, we can ask ourselves if it is what God wants us to do, whether we practise love and forgiveness in our midst and beyond, and whether we stand by those who are suffering. This ongoing self-reflection will enable us to identify the cast-out stone outside the vineyard that can be the cornerstone of a new spiritual building for coming generations. Amen.