Text: Matthew 21:33-46

**Introduction**

I have to be honest that I’ve always had a bit of trouble thinking about the parable in our gospel text today. My trouble has been the application to me. In the context that Jesus tells it, it is completely understandable.

Our Old Testament reading is the original vineyard parable. The original vineyard is Old Testament Israel. And God declares everything that he’s done for Israel. Planted it in great soil. Cleared it of stones. Built a watchtower. Whether you want to read that watchtower as the King or the Priests or the Prophets, the watchtower is there. Everything that Israel needed to be fruitful was given. And yet when God looks for fruit, nothing. Worse than nothing, wild grapes. Unpalatable. Some poisonous. Choking out the cultivated vines. More weed than plant. So what does God say he will do with that vineyard? I will make it a wasteland. And in that Old Testament setting it is a parable of the exile. God does indeed break up the vineyard that was ancient Israel. The Kingdom is destroyed. The prophets fall silent. The temple is leveled.

Now he does restore them in some measure. Israel does return from exile. But things are never really the same. They are never their own kingdom. The second temple for most of its existence isn’t much, and it takes Herod, a half Jew, to restore some of the luster. But even then, something is lacking. And the prophets are non-existent. Until one shows up in the wilderness baptizing.

**Text**

And that is the context of Jesus’ parable. Jesus’ vineyard leans on Isaiah’s but it also much simpler. The master of the house plants a vineyard, puts a fence around it, puts a winepress and tower, but leases it out to tenants. I think you can hear the distancing in Jesus’ description. This vineyard is important, but it is not the personal beloved possession. “What more was there to do for my vineyard?” is not heard. Instead “he went into another country.”

It is so clearly a parable about post-exile Israel that even the Chief Priests understood it. And remember that the parables were told so that “hearing they would not hear.” But even “the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parable and perceived that he was speaking about them.” Israel has learned something from the ruin of the first vineyard. When the owner comes looking for fruit, kill him and claim the vineyard.

But how are we to receive it? Is it just a dead letter? Only for those chief priests and pharisees? Maybe, but I’m very reluctant to say any piece of scripture is just not for us. Because sinful me would probably refuse to hear exactly the Words I need to hear.

**Christology**

So let’s start at the end. There are three summaries that Jesus places on the parable. The first summary is that “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” This is quoted from Psalm 118. And the way that ancient citations work is not in a narrow sense but the broader sense. When Jesus chastises them for “never reading the Scriptures” it’s a chastisement about not understand the larger story. And that Psalm starts with a threefold declaration that “the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever.” Part of the fruit looked for is the praise of the LORD who has loved us.

How has the LORD loved us? “All nations surrounded us, in the name of the LORD I cut them off. The LORD is my strength and song and has become my salvation.”

How has the LORD loved us? “Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.”

The Son of God came to earth, became incarnate, and the world rejected him. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. But the stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone. It is through Christ that though the nations surround us, we are given the victory. It is through Christ that we are given that song of salvation and triumph. It is after Christ that we might walk in righteousness. And it in in Christ that we are able to give thanks.

The cornerstone of the new and living temple that sings the praise of God forever is Christ. And it is this church – these living stones - in the midst of all nations that is the marvelous doing of the LORD before our eyes. It is this church that will give Him fruits in their seasons. Prayer in the season of prayer. Praise in the season of praise. All given through faith in the cornerstone we are built on. Faith that the crucified is solid ground.

**Moral**

But the second summary that Jesus adds is “therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit.”

The vineyard, the Kingdom, the church, has been given to us by grace. And we produce its fruits – prayer and praise, justice and righteousness – through faith. But the church can often be just like those initial tenants. We can look at those sent, even the Son, and think we can take this place ourselves. “Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.” We do this anytime we look at the church and think that we have ways to make its purpose better. Through the ages there are countless examples of usurping the fruits that belong to Christ.

We are a church of the Reformation, so one of the clear ones that we would point at is how the popes of that time demanded indulgences and other schemes in place of the gospel proclamation. The modern examples tend to be smaller in effect but no less a usurpation. From mainline protestants erasing commandments to prosperity preachers building places reflecting their own glory. All of them are examples of looking a the vineyard of God and say “I can do what I want with it.”

And this comes right down to our own individual hearts. Are we being built on the cornerstone of Christ. Or do we place ourselves on our own personal image of Christ. “My Jesus wouldn’t do that…God can’t mean that…surely God wants me to do this.” Are you sure? Or are you attempting to kill the son and keep the vineyard yourself?

The steadfast love of the LORD endures forever. Repentance is always the first fruit of faith. Those who will not produce the fruit, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from. Those should be words of terror.

**Eschatological**

The third summary that Jesus places on the parable is “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

The cornerstone has been planted in the midst of this world. God has sent his Son and established his gospel for all peoples to hear. And you cannot avoid it. There are only three ways.

One can fall on this stone. We see Christ, yet we pay no attention. We walk by and we walk by and eventually it becomes part of the background of something much more important to us. And then we fall. We trip walking past. Whether we trip over Christ because we have become ashamed of him and what he says, or we trip over Christ because we no longer recognize where and how we walk. It is not the cornerstone – Christ – who is moved. It will be ourselves that are broken into pieces. The vineyard has been given to us – other tenants. And we are charged with knowing it and keeping it. Not taking it for granted, lest we trip and break.

The stone can fall on people. The opposite of paying no attention, we can set ourselves directly against God. The LORD has placed the cornerstone. He places it where he wills. His Word is secure. We can rail against that. We can try and push against it. The World is full of empires and individuals who thought they could move Christ. Yet the stone God places crushes those it falls on. Setting yourself in opposition to God is foolishness.

No God has leased to us the vineyard and set the cornerstone for us so that we might build on the rock. God has placed Christ in our midst that we might dwell securely in his vineyard. God has given us his son that we might bear fruit leading to eternal life.

We have been given the vineyard with a true and perfect cornerstone. How then shall we live in the vineyard of God?