

Matthew 21:33-46 New International Version (NIV)

The Parable of the Tenants

33 "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 moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

38 "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.' 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

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

41 "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."

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

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,

and it is marvellous in our eyes'[a]?"

43 "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. 44 Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."[b]

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. 46 They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

Matthews packs 10 parables into the 4 chapters that mark the first 3 days of holy week. That's a lot of teaching that Jesus is doing in the newly cleaned out temple. I would imagine that these are parables and teaching that Jesus has been doing in every village and town, up and down Israel for the last couple of years. Some of them are well known to the disciples and close followers - but they are new to many in the Jerusalem crowd. Every time Jesus told them, I expect he would have questions and answers, and explain parts and reference things to the scriptures, the Hebrew Bible.

One of the stories Jesus told is the parable of the Vineyard, or the Tenants as its usually called, as its more about them than the vines.

Jesus says there was an owner, who planted a vineyard, put a wall round it, dug a winepress, and built a watchtower. Then rented the vineyard to owners. He sent his servants to collect the fruit, but they were beaten and stoned to death. Then he sent more servants and the same happened. Finally he sends his son, but the tenants think - if we kill the heir, we'll own the vineyard! So they kill him outside the vineyard.

Jesus asks the listeners - what should the owner do? And the crowd in Jerusalem listening say - give the bad tenants a seeing to ("bring those wretches to a wretched end"!), and find new tenants.

And you need to know that Jesus is basically retelling Isaiah chapter 5 -

5

I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

2

He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it

and cut out a winepress as well.

This passage would have been very familiar to those listening. The vineyard was a very familiar metaphor for the land of Israel, and Jesus hearers, especially the pharisees and those in charge, would have jumped immediately to the passages in the Bible and would have known Jesus was talking about them.

The vineyard is seen as belonging to God, and given by God - just as Israel the land was given to the people by God when they came from Egypt, and it stands for God's giving of a good and lovely thing - all those sweet grapes and tasty wine - God's provision. And the vineyard is like a link between God and Israel - it binds the two together.

So Psalm 80 refers to the Exodus, led by Moses and says - you brought a vine out of Egypt, clear the ground for it, it took root and filled the land.

And prophets like Isaiah and Hosea use the vineyard to issue a warning to the people of Israel - that God, the vineyard owner, expects good fruit. He is putting in this work to create a people who are faithful to him.

And the prophets warn, that unless they do bear good fruit, God will come and break down its wall, and make it a wasteland.

So the vineyard is a symbol both of the goodness of God and the land he has given them, but also a warning, that if they do not follow God, he will take away that land.

And then after the judgement happens, and they are taken into exile (where they struggle to "sing the lord's song", if you remember Psalm 137) - God brings them back.

Then the prophets Amos and Jeremiah, finally use the vineyard as the symbol of restoration and blessing - that God will bring people back and they will plant vines gain.

So when Jesus tells this parable of the vineyard, a few days before his death.. the hearers would have known he was talking about the future of Israel.

And in the parables are coded language - the characters and events stand for particular things, there is a right way and a wrong way to read the code. So the vineyard owner stands for God, and the vineyard is Israel, and the tenants are those in charge - so the Pharisees and Sadducees.

[Some commentators argue that you could read that the tenants are the Roman occupying force, but to be honest Jesus addresses them only once in this whole Holy Week discourse - but focusses on arguing with Pharisees and Sadducees, including the whole of chapter 23, which is woe to you Pharisees, the rest of the time - so I think its fair to assume that they're the object of this parable, not the Romans. And it even says in verse 45 that the Pharisees knew he was talking about them]

And the servants that are sent stand for the prophets - messengers from God. Sent again and again to warn and encourage the people to return to God. Those like Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah and Amos.

The vineyard owners son seems to clearly be Jesus himself, and he's killed outside the vineyard - as Jesus was crucified outside the city wall. And the vineyard is taken away from the Jews, and handed over to new people - that's the church, the followers of Jesus.

Yet, its hard to see that those listening would make the link between God's son and Jesus, at least, not before the resurrection or the coming of the Holy Spirit. To most Jews, Jesus could not possibly be claiming to be God's son, because that would be blasphemy. The Jews believe there is only 1 God, and means there can't be 2. And in the end Jesus is charged by the high priest with exactly that - claiming to be God's son. So I don't know how they heard "the vineyard owners son" that first time - or whether it was something they just went home and puzzled over and argued about.

The same is true about taking the vineyard away. The other prophecies about the vineyard have it being destroyed, and able to be rebuilt. A bit like the Jews had done with the temple when they came back from exile. Their whole identity was in being "God's chosen people" yet Jesus seems to be saying that they could lose that status! That the vineyard would go to others - how would that even be possible?

And then in Matthew's account, Jesus finishes off this parable by saying - the stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone - and then repeating or emphasising, that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you - meaning the Pharisees, and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.

I think Jesus is saying that the vineyard is over. That the old way - of being linked to God through the land, through the temple is finished. The old covenant relationship - you're my people, and as long as you behave you can stay in the land - that all that is changing.

The issue is no longer the old "vineyard," but rather a totally new structure of which Jesus himself is the "cornerstone." That structure is God's reign or empire, which Jesus has been proclaiming from the beginning of his ministry and which the church will continue to proclaim in Jesus' name.

There is a new cornerstone - Jesus - and that it all depends, hinges on him - he is the marker - where you measure off from, and where do you stand in relation to him? Some see this as his claiming to be the new 'Israel', or his founding the church as the new 'Israel'. Either way, it is a bold, confrontational, message that would have annoyed the authorities and disturbed most of those who heard it.

And then of course, for us, in the bigger picture, we know that Jesus calls himself **the** vine - he is the new Israel - As Israel was supposed to show the world what God looked like, so Jesus will show the world, as the Jews were supposed to be God's people to connect representatively with God - so Jesus will connect us with God. And Jesus will bear the good fruit - it is beautiful that at the last supper, we will be invited to drink his wine in order to abide in him.