



## *The new* SHOFAR

*Ordinary Sunday 27*

Matthew 21:33-45 - *God expects much of us*

### **Faith communities exist for a divine purpose**

In this further parable involving the metaphor of farming, God is presented as being a long suffering, patient and just God. The God who chose Israel and included her in his divine mission in creation, has patiently worked alongside his chosen people. They were, however, far from perfect. Time and time again he had sent prophets among them, warning them, encouraging them to return to him and calling them to produce the fruits he was asking of them. If Israel is rejected, it is not because God has been uncaring. Their rejection is the fruit of their own stubborn pride. They reject God. They sinned.

### **Here is Matthew's indication of his intent:**

In using Isaiah 5:2 Jesus makes it clear to the Jewish leadership that they are directly implicated in this teaching. There is no doubt in the mind of the evangelist, that religious leadership has a vital role to play in the life of a faith community. It is into their hands the ministry of *modelling Christ* has been entrusted. If they fail to live an example of what faithful discipleship means, what hope is there for members of the community to overcome their own temptations and weaknesses? Church leaders have a God-given responsibility to instill hope and an evangelistic spirit in the life of believers by the way they live and through the way they minister in God's vineyard. They do not have to take up the ministry of Shepherd but if they do accept God's invitation to serve, then must understand how along with the gift of leadership comes a serious responsibility for God's "vines". We see this in the new element here, the idea that the vineyard is now leased out to tenant farmers and the landlord going off and leaving the garden in their hands. It is the role of the tenant farmers to care for the needs of the vineyard and to ensure that the fruit is produced on time.

### **There will be a time of harvesting - judgment**

The phrase *when the time of the harvest arrived...* uses the same language the Gospels use for the arrival of the Kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus. It applies to the End Time judgment when the fruits of the garden will be assessed. As Israel of old had rejected the many prophets sent to them by a patient God, so these tenant farmers reject every attempt to call them to account for their actions. In the end, the landowner sends his own son and heir, just as *in the end...when the time was ripe...* God sent his only Son.

Now Jesus puts the key point clearly. They reject the Son's claim of sonship. It is not just that they do not want to be accountable. They are rejecting the whole idea that this Son has any claim to be the authentic heir...just as they reject the claim that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. Once they do that, they can then claim the garden for themselves and run it in their own way. This is what brings the judgment down on their heads – the rejection of the Son as the true and only Son and Heir. That judgment will then come about through the very person they had rejected – Jesus. He is the stone who has been rejected by the leaders of Israel. However, they did not want to take him as a part of building the kingdom God wanted. Now he has come back as the key stone, the corners stone and the leaders of Israel will stumble on him. It is no surprise then to see the leaders turn on him and further their intent to put him to death. They will stumble because of the very One they have rejected.

## **Here is the difficulty for Church leadership today**

I remember struggling with a priest who referred constantly to the parish in which he had pastoral oversight as being *my parish*. I would remind him over and over again how the flock over which he had a shared ministry of oversight was God's parish and it had to be run along the lines set down by Jesus the Son sent by the Owner of the Vineyard. I can think of Bishops who spoke in similar language. They still see themselves as being CEOs of a business and so "run" the diocese along good business lines, feeling free to speak in favour of things having no support in either Scripture or tradition. I would try and remind them how they are not the Chief Shepherd of God's flock but are servants presenting to the Children of God the Way of Life taught, preached and modelled by Jesus Christ. All Church ministries – bishops, clergy, lay ministers, parish councilors, wardens, pastoral carers, etc are bound to model the Gospel (and will be called to account in terms of the same Gospel) within the community they serve. If ministry comes down to a personal style and preference, they become little different to the leaders of the Jews who were hindering the ministry of Jesus.

### **But God never gives up on us – even when we go cold on God**

One of the insights into human history this parable offers to believers is the reassurance that God continues to have a mission in creation. From the very beginning, God has been bringing all things to the end he desires, to the goal he has in mind. When Adam and Eve sinned God did not abandon men and women to their own fate. He chose Abraham to collaborate with what he was doing as he sought to bring all peoples back into his loving embrace. He then raised up Moses, who, in the name of Yahweh, led Israel out of Egypt so they could be settled in the Promised Land. This ever-patient God continued to love them, even though they broke the covenant over and over again. As the Scriptures paint a picture of Yahweh as being a long suffering, eternally patient and merciful God, so here in the parable, the Lord of the Vineyard is ever patient... *Again he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way.* He sent them prophets so that they might repent and return to faithful living and so rejoice in his divine blessings. These prophets were rejected and many of them put to death. What did God do? He sent more prophets. At no time did God give up on Israel or abandon his plan for creation. The divine mission went on and will continue until the End of time. So committed is God to this plan he even sent his only Son to become a man among us. When Jesus was rejected by Israel and put to death, the expectation would have been that the patience of God would finally run out. But it did not. God raised his Son and it is in the Risen Son the divine mission continues.

The great news is that nothing we can do is capable of sidelining the mission of God. Despite our own sinfulness, failings, weaknesses and stubborn pride, God continues to shower his love upon us and continues to call us to himself. God does not give up on us, even if we give up on God. Even the tenant farmers in the parable - the leaders of the Jews - are not rejected forever. There remains always a chance of repentance: for the tenant farmers, the Jewish leaders and for ourselves.

### **What then is Matthew suggesting to us?**

For disciples of Christ, there are no off times, no days off, no time for retirement from the obligations to live and witness to the Gospel each and every day. God expects/demands that our words and deeds effectively tie into His mission in the world.

The Gospel is calling upon us to re-commit ourselves to engage with the missionary activities of God as they touch our lives through the people we encounter. God speaks to us through others and in ignoring even one of these the least of God's children we ignore and neglect the Christ who lives within them, the Son of God who is reaching out to me. God rejects not a single person and ignores no human needs. His expectation is that we do the same.