

The gospel reading for today is Jesus' famous parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard. Mark, Matthew and Luke all record it. For Mark this is the last parable Jesus spoke before his passion. The whole story is Jesus' way of explaining what was going on then and there in Jerusalem. It is Jesus' own perspective on the very events he was involved in – rejected by those he had come to, but destined to be vindicated by God. We may look at the parable from another angle, as Jesus' self-explanation of his thrice prediction of passion in Jerusalem. In short, it explains his vocation as designated by his heavenly Father.

The vineyard owner is of course God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenants are Israel's officials, and the slaves are the earlier prophets, ending with John the Baptist. The Son can only be Jesus himself. Three points I like to share with you with this parable.

1. Why Jesus quoted Psalm 118?
2. Do you notice Jesus also quoted Daniel 2?
3. Must the Son be sent – the last and effective way?

1.

Psalm 118 has been used by the pilgrims when singing their hosannas. This psalm, well known from many Jewish celebrations, is about going up to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple, in the presence of the Lord. It mentions the fact that part of the glory of the Temple architecture is the stone which wouldn't fit any other part of the building but which is just what's needed for the capstone, the stone at the very summit of a corner or an arch. That is the image Jesus needs for his point: what he has come to do, and to be, can't be fitted into a different sort of building, and indeed will be rejected by 'builders' who have their own interests in mind (in this case, the chief priests, determined to hang on to power and prestige).

2.

But then why this stone becomes such a menace that will crush anything and anyone stand in its way? V.44 to the Jews of Jesus' time would not have much difficulty in relating it to Daniel 2 and Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar' dream. It was all about the kingdom of the world and the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of the world was the successive kingdoms of gold, silver, bronze and iron. Each would be less glorious than the one

before; people in those days didn't usually believe that the world was getting better, but that it was getting worse. Finally there would be a brittle kingdom, like iron mixed with clay. Then there would come something different altogether. A Stone – would smash the feet; in other words, it would destroy the last kingdom. The whole tottering structure of the empires of the world would come down with a crash. The Stone itself would grow to become a mountain: a new sort of kingdom, ruling the whole world in a new sort of way.

The Jews of Jesus' day would have any difficulty figuring out what it all meant for them. The Kingdoms of the world, starting with Babylon and Persia, had gone on until at last it was Rome's turn. And now, surely, was the moment for the Stone to appear! The Stone, they thought, meant God's Messiah, who would set up the Kingdom of God by destroying the world's kingdoms and starting something quite new.

So in quoting Psalm 118 and Daniel 2, Jesus is implying He is the Stone, the Messiah, God's anointed; He has come to bring into being the Kingdom of God through which the kingdoms of the world will shiver, shake and fall into the ground.

The son of the vineyard owner rejected is vindicated when the owner comes and destroys them, and gives the vineyard to someone else. The Stone the builders rejected is vindicated when it goes in place at the top of the corner.

3.

Why must it be the son who is sent? Why can't it be anyone else? The significance of the coming of Jesus has many meanings, but, before it has those many other meanings, it has a historical meaning. History becomes meaningful by the coming of the Son. That is to say, history has shape and meaning because of the coming of the Son of God. 'God' the writer to the Hebrews proclaimed, echoing a parable of Jesus' own teaching, has 'in these last days spoken to us by a Son.' The word spoken 'in these last days' makes a history out of the 'many and various' utterances of the past which would otherwise have had no shape and direction. Here history is given a climax and, with the climax, all that preceded is formed into history. Christ's authority is 'historical' because it confers a unique meaning on the shape of

world events. But from that it follows that it confers a unique and unrepeatable significance to each event, as it is seen to be a part, whether major or minor, of that total history. No deed of man can claim any longer to have autonomous intelligibility.

The problem for most of us is to believe in history that has an interpretative function. During the pandemic, I've often been asked, whether this is the 'end-time.' That is to say, after the pandemic Jesus will return. People just take a very naive view of the book of Revelation. Pestilence is mentioned in the fourth seal in chapter 6; it is now fulfilled in the appearance of Covid-19. But throughout history, there are many pandemics, such as the black death of Middle Ages and Spanish Flu of early 20th century. However, it is Jesus who can and will always, till the end of the ages, interpret what has gone past and what is happening in the present, and what will be in the future. History cannot do that. Many Christians look at events of the world and then point to the Bible saying: 'God's promise is fulfilled' or 'God's prediction is fulfilled.' In other words, that history fulfilled the Bible. No, it is Jesus who fulfilled what is contained in the Bible, Old Testament as well as New Testament, not the other way round. The coming of the Son is not arbitrary in time. It is the defining moment of the whole history of humankind.

Likewise, some folks keep saying the world will no longer be the same since Covid-19 appeared as though this is the defining moment of world history. Some politicians even say, we now 'live in a new normal.' We have to adapt to the new way of living. The Christian Church, however, must proclaim the Gospel in a pandemic or out of a pandemic: since the coming of Jesus, the new way of living has begun. The apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17 *'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'* The end-time has already arrived. The book of Hebrews says: 'Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever.'