

Terrible Tenants (Matthew 21:33-46)

What is so important about believing in Jesus? Why is this one religious act seen as the difference between life and death? We need to see the bigger picture and this parable of Jesus picks up the sad pattern of human relations with God and helps us to see why the way we relate to Jesus is so important.

Jehoiada, Joash and Zechariah

It was 842 BC. There was uproar in Jerusalem. The king had been killed in battle and now his mother was seizing power. In a ruthless act she arranged to kill the whole royal family.

However, Jehoiada's wife managed to rescue the baby son of the king, Joash, and with her husband who was a priest they hid him away from the queen.

After six years, Jehoiada managed to organise a coup. The queen was toppled and Joash, who was only seven was installed as king. The royal line of David was restored and Joash would go on to rule for 40 years. Everything went well while Jehoiada was alive and the people followed God.

When Jehoiada died at a good old age he was so respected that he was buried with the kings.

Refused God his due

But after Jehoiada died, Joash rejected the God of Israel and started following false gods, man made gods. He rejected the God of Jehoaida, who had saved his life and put him on the throne in Jerusalem.

Rejected God's warning messengers

God responded by sending prophets to challenge the king. One of them was Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada. Zechariah was very critical of Joash for disobeying God and Joash didn't like it. So Joash arranged for Zechariah to be stoned to death in the courtyard of the temple - he had the son of the man who had rescued him and given him the throne killed.

Was replaced by God

God's judgement on Joash was swift. Within the year he was seriously wounded in a disastrous battle against the Arameans and when he returned to Jerusalem his officials disgusted by what he did to Zechariah killed him in his bed. So, his son who did seek to live for God replaced him as king. And unlike Jehoiada the priest, Joash the king was not buried in the tombs of the king!!

In short, Joash:

- refused God his due

- rejected God's warning messengers

- was replaced by God's judgement: his son replaced him as king and Jehoiada even took his place in the tombs of the kings.

Is Christianity unfair?

Sometimes people criticise Christianity, because it seems unfair.

People can take the Christian message as something like:

- "Believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life.

- If you don't you'll face God's judgement."

Although, this is a true statement of the Christian faith it is not the whole picture.

Taken by itself it does indeed make Christianity seem very unfair:

- Why should our eternal salvation come down to this one issue?
- Why should someone who believes in Jesus towards the end of their life after being a horrible person most of their life receive eternal life, when someone who has lived a pretty good life, but doesn't believe in Jesus face judgement?
- Why should the one issue of believing in Jesus, trump any other behaviour in life?

To truly understand why these criticisms of Christianity do not hold up, we need to see that faith in Jesus is not just one random action that God looks for, but actually a signal of our fundamental direction of life.

In short all of us in some way:

- refuse God his due,
we don't seek to live the life God asks of us or to give him the thanks and praise he deserves,
even though we owe our existence, our life, our abilities and everything we have to God.

But God in his infinite love and patience offers us a second chance, he sent Jesus.

To truly believe in Jesus means to change our heart and attitude to want to start living to give God his due.

To reject Jesus is to carry on refusing God his due and to carry on placing our self under God's judgement.

The choice of whether to believe in Jesus or not is a fundamental choice for the direction of our lives.

Isaiah's Parable of the Vineyard

80 years after the death of Joash, Isaiah the prophet began receiving words from God to tell the people of Jerusalem. These are recorded in the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament.

Like Zechariah the prophet he had warnings for the people of Jerusalem. One of these warnings is a song about a vineyard. It is an allegory or parable, where the vineyard represents the nation.

In verse 2 he says of the owner of the vineyard:

"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. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." (Isaiah 5:2)

Then he goes on to say:

"The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." (Isaiah 5:7)

Isaiah says that God as the one who had given Israel a wonderful place to live had expected to be repaid by seeing justice and righteousness lived out by the people, but instead they had refused to give God his due, they hadn't followed his teaching and the place was filled with bloodshed and cries of distress.

Would the people of Isaiah's day listen to God's warning?

Jesus in the Temple Courts

Another 750 years later and Jesus is walking the temple courts, the same place that Zechariah had been killed - although the temple had been rebuilt a couple of times since then.

These are Jesus's last days. He has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and been welcomed as a king. But the people in charge the wealthy elite are not happy. They don't like Jesus's criticism of them, they see him as a threat to the status quo. And it is always the wealthy elite that have the most to lose from a change in the status quo!!

So, the Chief Priests and the elders challenge Jesus about his right to criticise. In response Jesus tells three parables of which this is the middle one.

And it is a parable that the Chief Priests and elders would understand. Many of them would have been absentee landlords, owning farms and vineyards in other parts of the country, while they lived in Jerusalem. They would have related well to the main character in the story Jesus tells.

How the Parable works

But of course the parable is not really about landowners and tenants.

Like other parables that Jesus tells many of the elements represent different aspects.

Landowner = God

Notice that Jesus's description of the building of the vineyard is very similar to Isaiah's parable. The Chief Priests and elders would instantly realise this is a set up for a story where the landowner = God. They would also no doubt be expecting a story that was critical of Israel!

Tenants = Temple authorities

The tenants in the story are meant to represent the ruling elite in Jerusalem the Chief Priests and the elders. We don't know when the Chief Priests and rulers realised this, but at the end Matthew says that they knew Jesus was talking about them!

Fruit = Living as God asks

The fruit that the landowner expected refers to what we owe God. Throughout Matthew, 'fruit' is symbolic of the kind of lifestyles and behaviours that Jesus is calling us to live. Just as it does also in Isaiah, where he says God looked for justice and righteousness.

Back in the sermon on the mount, Jesus calls his followers to hunger and thirst for righteousness and a righteousness that is greater than that of the Jewish leaders of the time. A righteousness that comes out of the right heart attitudes not a mere lip service to following rules and regulations.

*Do you see that the refusal of the tenants in the story to pay what they owe the landowner is symbolic of the refusal of people to live as God calls them to live, **a refusal to pay God his due?***

The Slaves or servants = prophets

The slaves or servants in the story represent the Old Testament prophets, like Zechariah in the story I told at the start. But also like John the Baptist who had been beheaded by one of the present Jewish rulers, King Herod, because John had criticised him!

The prophets consistently called on Israel to turn back to God, to pay him his due, but more often than not they responded by rejecting God's messengers, sometimes even by killing them.

Son = Jesus

Now as Jesus knows that his crucifixion is about to happen he says following the same pattern as people like Joash and Herod, the Jerusalem authorities are going to arrange for the death of the Son.

In a subtle way, this is Jesus claiming to be the Son of God. It is also Jesus's way of predicting his own coming death.

*Do you see that this act of murder in the story simply fits the general pattern. It is an extreme version of **rejecting God's warning messengers?***

Who are the other tenants?

Jesus asks the Chief Priests and elders for their opinion about how the landlord should respond. As I said many of them would have been absentee landlords themselves.

If tenants had failed to pay them what they were due they would have been outraged and probably much less patient than the landlord in the story. And as they make clear if tenants had done that to their servants and son they would bring them to a wretched end and replace them with tenants who would pay them their due.

Their reaction is the natural reaction to the story Jesus tells, but it is also a self-condemnation of their own behaviour towards God and of the fact that they will soon arrange to have God's son, Jesus brutally killed.

Their reaction is an acknowledgement of God's justice in **replacing them with a people who will pay God his due?**

This is what Jesus says that God will do in verse 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."

But who are the people that will produce the fruit?

Jesus quotes from Psalm 118 in verse 42. It is the same Psalm which was quoted by the crowds welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem:

"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The quote says:

"Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? {Psalm 118:22,23}

In Aramaic the word for 'stone' is *'eben*, which is similar to the word for Son, *ben*. In the story the tenants reject the 'Son' and kill him. Yet, Jesus quotes this Psalm about the stone the builders reject becoming the capstone. How can the rejected Son take on such an important role if he has been killed?

Only by the resurrection! In the resurrection God shows that the one rejected by the temple leaders truly is the one who will be the capstone of the new temple.

Who are the other tenants? They are the ones who welcome Jesus as their king. That rather than rejecting his message embrace it and seek to live a life that truly does pay God what he is due. These are the ones who will replace the temple authorities as the true Kingdom of God!

How do you fit into the story?

So, how do you fit into the story? All of us have been those who have refused to give God his due in the past. But, how will you respond to God's warning messengers? How will you respond to his Son?

There are two choices:

Reject the messenger and find yourself in the same position as Joash or the Chief Priests and elders in Jerusalem. Ultimately, you will face God's judgement and be replaced with others who will accept the warning message.

or

Embrace God's warning message and seek to be those who pay God his due, who seek to live that greater righteousness Jesus calls us to and become a light shining in this dark world. giving glory and honour to God.

The choice between believing in Jesus or not is not a random religious construct. Because Jesus is the Son of God it is at the heart of how we choose to respond to God himself.