

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Sixth Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)

(Second Sunday of the Passion – PALM SUNDAY)

Lectionary Readings: **Isaiah 5: 1-7**
 Psalm 69: 1-18
 Mark 12: 1-12

On this Sixth Sunday in Lent we have only three Lectionary Readings for the Second Service of the day. As will be seen from the heading to this sheet, it is also the Second Sunday of the Passion – most commonly known as Palm Sunday. Nowhere, however, will there be found any reference to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem – presumably that will have been the focus of the Lectionary Readings for the Principal Service!

The readings from Isaiah and Mark share a common theme:

Isaiah 5: 1-7

¹I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard:
my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
²He 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.
³Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.
⁴What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?
⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.
⁶I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds not to rain on it.
⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Mark 12: 1-12

¹Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall round it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. ²At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.
⁶'He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son."
⁷'But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." ⁸So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.
⁹'What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰Haven't you read this passage of Scripture:
 '"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
 ¹¹the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?'
(Psalm 118: 22-23)
¹²Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Some scholars have suggested that Jesus, being familiar with the writing of Isaiah used the Old Testament passage as the basis of His later parable.

I always think of the prophetic ministry of Isaiah commencing at the event described in chapter 6 – his vision, precisely dated in the year that King Uzziah died, of the Lord seated on his throne, high and exalted in the temple. This vision has one result:

⁵ 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'

We remember how, in that vision, one of the seraphs flew to him with a live coal from the altar:

⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'

⁸**Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'**
And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'

The preceding chapters speak of earlier visions concerning the health of the nation:

The vision **concerning Judah and Jerusalem** that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. (Isaiah 1:1)

We have already seen the time-line, where Isaiah fits with the end of the reign of Uzziah who reigned over Judah for 52 years and was then succeeded by his son, grandson and great grandson in turn - Jotham (16 years); Ahaz (16 years) and Hezekiah (29 years). Isaiah was clearly around for a long time.

There appears to be another vision, which is mentioned at the beginning of the second chapter:

The mountain of the LORD

¹ This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

²In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.

What do "the last days mean" – sometime vague in the immediate future or looking forward to the Messianic era?

Part way through chapter 2 we come to a section described (in NIV) as “The Day of the Lord” and leading into chapter 3 - “Judgement on Jerusalem and Judah”

This latter theme is carried through into our reading from chapter 5 – The Song of the Vineyard.

In verse 1 we read of “his vineyard” but we have to go to verse 7 to realise the ‘poet’ is speaking of the Lord’s vineyard:

⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Verses 1 and 2 describe the Lord’s preparation for His people Israel – “planted with the best of vines” but the people of Judah yield only bad fruit. Verses 3 and 4 find the Lord asking what more He could have done in preparing His vineyard; making preparation for His people – why have His people turned away from Him “yielding only bad grapes”?

Verses 5 and 6 bring notice of “Judgement on the people of Judah” – what the Lord proposes to do to His vineyard, to destroy it. Then we come to the explanatory verse (7) quoted above.

“The Parable of the Tenants” follows a passage in Mark’s Gospel where “The Authority of Jesus is Questioned”. Jesus is in the Temple, during the week following His triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, and is asked by the chief priests, teacher of the Law and elders to tell them who has authorised His teaching and His actions.

Skilfully, as ever, Jesus turns the question back on them by asking if John’s baptism was authorised in heaven or was it of human origin. The religious leaders realise they have been trapped – either answer will get them into ‘very deep water’!

What could they say:

³³ So they answered Jesus, ‘We don’t know.’

Jesus said, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’

We then come to the Parable which also has a man planting a (walled) vineyard, digging a winepress and building a watchtower. A footnote to Matthew 21:33 (in the NIV Study Bible) gives detail of such watchtowers:

For guarding the vineyard, especially when the grapes ripened, and for shelter.

The rabbis specified that it was to be a raised wooden platform, 15 feet high and 6 feet square.

He then rented out the vineyard – expecting to share in the harvest each year. In the Old Testament “Song” the Vineyard is Israel, the produce – the people of Judah. Here in the New Testament it is also about the Lord’s creation and how the people (tenants) react to it.

Year by year a servant is sent to the tenants to collect the annual share of the harvest, only to be ill treated, beaten up or even killed. The chief priests, teachers of the law and elders (verse 12) must have realised at this point that Jesus was referring to the Lord sending prophet after prophet to His people and the way they were treated, especially by the religious leaders.

Jesus goes on to tell of the owner of the vineyard sending a son believing that the son would be respected.

We all know the result and its significance both at the time Jesus shared the parable and today as once again we approach Good Friday:

⁷ But the tenants said to one another, “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.”

⁸ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

To me, Verse 9 suggests that the owner of the vineyard – the Lord – would deal with the wayward tenants (His so called people) and give the vineyard to others. Matthew’s account says He will give the vineyard to:

“other tenants who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time” (Matthew 21:41)

I looked at the NIV Study Bible footnote for Mark 12:9 which referred to the footnote for Matthew 21:41 where a similar view to the one I have given was expressed:

Other tenants. Gentiles, to whom Paul turned when the Jews, for the most part, rejected the gospel (Acts 13:46; 18:6).

By the second century the church was composed almost entirely of Gentiles.

All three of the synoptic gospels carry this parable in near identical form until the verse in each gospel re giving the vineyard to others. Matthew and Luke have fuller conclusions to the parable than that found in Mark: (Matthew 21: 41-45)

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.

Footnotes

a. [Matthew 21:42](#) Psalm 118:22,23

b. [Matthew 21:44](#) Some manuscripts do not have verse 44.

Jesus was teaching in the temple precincts during his last week on earth in human form. He is clearly laying out the future – His death at the hands of His own people – the ‘tenancy’ being widened to the whole of humanity.

John does not record this parable in his gospel but there is, in his gospel, the passage that focuses on Jesus as the vine – one of the two alternative ‘set’ gospel readings in the Covenant Service.

Jesus is the ‘rootstock’ of the vine. His followers are the branches grafted into the rootstock with the purpose of bearing fruit. Those with an interest in gardening or horticulture will know this as a common modern practice when growing apples etc. on a large scale. (I remember seeing, some years ago, an advertisement for a tree, producing different varieties of apple on each branch!!)

Jesus’ Father is the gardener – on hand for necessary pruning. Dead wood is cut out and discarded; fruitful branches are pruned so that they will bear even more fruit.

How much pruning is necessary in our lives – a question we should all be constantly asking?

Look at the everyday maintenance we offer to our plants - some require nothing more than a gentle trim of the odd end; others require regular cutting back of excess growth; while a third group need to be cut back to ground level to encourage new and fruitful growth.

How much pruning is needed in your life; how much pruning is required in mine?

The gardener knows what is best for each one of us – may each one of us be open to Him.

This week brings the first half of another psalm attributed to David. There is however some doubt as to this authorship – scholars feeling the psalm was probably written much later - after the start of the exile in Babylon.

The Daily Study Bible gives, as a title to the first part of the psalm, “UP TO MY NECK.” It goes on to say that this is not some use of ‘modern slang’ but a case of translation – the ‘neck’ of this passage is often rendered ‘soul’ in other passages.

“In the very early days of the language the seat of life was reckoned to be in the throat, probably because life could so easily be extinguished by squeezing it”

The NIV Bible Commentary gives as its heading for the psalm – “**The Zeal for Your House and God’s Love for His Own**”. In the introduction to the text we read:

“This is an *imprecatory* psalm (*one speaking of suffering*) of the *individual lament* genre. Because of its many New Testament references, this psalm has been interpreted messianically”.

The title given to the psalm reminds us of one of these NT references: (John 2: 13-22)

Jesus clears the temple courts

¹³ When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money.

¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.

¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’

⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘**Zeal for your house will consume me.**’ (Psalm 69:9)

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, ‘What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’

²⁰ They replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’

²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Commentators tell us that after psalm 22, number 69 is the most quoted in the New Testament. We have the direct quotation above but other references are often less distinct - scholars seeing the textual content of the psalm fulfilled in the life of Jesus:

⁴ **Those who hate me without reason** outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. (Psalm 69:4)

This messianic prophecy is seen as being fulfilled when Jesus says: (John 15: 18-25)

The world hates the disciples

¹⁸ ‘If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

²⁰ Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.

²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.

²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father as well.

²⁴ If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father.

²⁵ But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: **"They hated me without reason."**

As is typical of so many of the psalms, the writer cries out to the Lord in anguish. Much suffering is described; folly and guilt are expressed yet once again there is an underlying confidence in the Lord:

¹³ **But I pray to you, LORD, in the time of your favour; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation.**

¹⁶ Answer me, LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me.

¹⁷ Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.

¹⁸ Come near and rescue me; deliver me because of my foes.

Let us, like the psalmist, make verse 13 our prayer.

Charles Wesley penned the following words – no longer found in any current hymn book.

Father, to Thee my soul I lift,
My soul on Thee depends,
Convinced that every perfect gift
From Thee alone descends.

Mercy and grace are Thine alone,
And power and wisdom too;
Without the Spirit of Thy Son
We nothing good can do.

We cannot speak one useful word,
One holy thought conceive,
Unless, in answer to our Lord,
Thyself the blessing give.

His blood demands the purchased grace;
His blood's availing plea
Obtained the help for all our race,
And sends it down to me.

Thou all our works in us hast wrought;
Our good is all divine;
The praise of every virtuous thought,
And righteous word, is Thine.

**From Thee, through Jesus, we receive
The power on Thee to call,
In Whom we are, and move, and live;
Our God is all in all!**

A 'modern' song – copyright 2006 – by Paul Oakley

I am not ashamed,
I'm not afraid to say,
Jesus, You have made my heart believe.
Your grace alone has saved me.
The truth has set the captive free.
**You turned my life around,
Chose me as Your own,
Jesus, You have placed Your life in me.**
And I cannot contain such love,
This hope of glory You have placed in me.

*Oh, the wonder and the power of the cross,
It's foolishness to those who cannot see.
But every day I wake to find
Your blood goes on forever cleansing me.*

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!