

In the temple, Jesus has been teaching the crowds - those who have followed him there and those who gather around to hear what he has to say. Like them, we hear his teaching in parables, these stories that he tells to reflect the context of his own time, but that reveal something larger, deeper, more than, to the audience listening.

We hear Jesus use a familiar image again - that of the vineyard. His audience that day would have known he was recalling that heartbroken love poem from Isaiah, chapter 5. However, Jesus uses that well known poem to speak into the world in which he and the people live.

In Roman occupied Palestine, the absent landowner and tenants who leased and worked the land from him was a reality for people. More than likely, those who had been small, subsistence farmers at one time had their land taken from them and had no choice to work for the landowner, to sign a contract to return a portion of the fruit or yield to the landowner himself. It was a system that privileged the wealthy few and left the people, those crowds who were listening to Jesus, to struggle under the weight of debt and poverty, of hunger and violence.

They hear the parable in the context of God's desire for Israel to live a life that produces fruit; of God's desire for Israel to live justly on the land that is given as a gift, and in just relationships to one another.

Jesus' parable moves as does Isaiah's poem.

A vineyard is planted in fertile soil, it is painstakingly cleared and lovingly tended, set up for stability and production with a hewn wine vat and a watch tower. But then the poem turns. The vineyard does not yield good results, but produces only wild grapes. And we know we are no longer talking about grapes or wine production. The poem turns its attention on the people and on God's justified anger and hurt over the way Israel has forgotten to live according to the commands of God, according to the Torah.

In the verse right after what we heard from Isaiah this morning, the prophet goes on to say something about living justly: “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!”

The prophet is talking about the squeezing of people until there is nothing left for them, of the amassing of land and wealth for only a few, of the neglect of the needs of others in their midst. This is also the context of Jesus’ parable in the temple.

Jesus’ parable moves quickly too. We hear wave after wave of violence. First the slaves sent by the landowner are set upon by the tenants of the vineyard, then another group. There is violence and bloodshed. Finally, the landowner sends his son, his stand-in, for to respect the landowner is to respect the son as one and the same. The son comes to collect the agreed upon produce. But he too is killed by the tenants; the tenants perhaps thinking that the landowner is dead and that the land would revert back to them.

Jesus’ question to the crowds and those who listening that day follows the logical violence of the story - what will the landowner do to those tenants, when he comes? The crowds know full well what would happen and answer that the landowner would come and kill those tenants.

But Jesus moves his hearers away from landowners and vineyards, violence and bloodshed, and quotes from Psalm 118: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

The psalmist is singing about God’s steadfast love, a love which endures forever. The song is about God’s salvation for the people, a liturgical offering of praise in which an individual comes to the temple to give thanks to God. It was a psalm, among others, that was sung for the first two nights

and days of the Passover festival. A reminder of God's rescue of the weak, the needy, the oppressed.

Jesus moves his audience again from that psalm of thanksgiving to speak of the kingdom, that central concept of his life and teaching. He says to those who will listen that the kingdom will be given to those who produce fruit. No more vineyards or wild grapes, landowners and violence, Jesus is talking about what it means for God's people to live within the framework of the laws of the Torah, the commands of God, the kingdom. It is found in those who hear and those who do. It doesn't come merely by wealth or name or bloodline or title or status - it comes to those who listen to God's word and who live within the parameters of justice and mercy.

Notice that Jesus doesn't answer the question about the landowner coming back to his vineyard. He leaves it to the crowds to answer. They answer in the logic and systems of the world in which they live. Instead, what Jesus does is move them to remember God's salvation, God's works of justice for the Hebrew people who left the bondage of Pharaoh and Egypt, and God's commands to live in right relationship with each other, to always remember their own neediness and to reflect it in their care of the most vulnerable among them - the orphans, aliens, and widows.

The words of judgement in Jesus' story-telling are not only for ancient Israel, nor for chief priests and Pharisees, they are meant for us to see ourselves as well. The parable asks us too where have we fallen away from the commands of love, from living within the kingdom of God.

As social instability surrounds us with fear of climate catastrophe, of the rise of hate groups and their easy manipulation by those who would use them for their own gain, of what this pandemic will bring, it becomes all too easy to forget our shared humanity.

Instead of living into God's providence and abundance, fear tends to push instead into the myth that the pie is only so big and we need to grab the biggest piece or else someone else will get it. Fear moves us to live into

and out of the myth that as human beings we are in competition with one another, not that we are called to live into and out of co-operation and mutual benefit with and for each other. We join house to house and field to field to protect ourselves and squeeze out others who also need life and sustenance. We are told this is the context in which we live.

The scribes and Pharisees, those who hold positions of leadership hear in Jesus' parable an accusation. Perhaps they hear it because they know it's a fair accusation. They have forgotten Torah and made peace with the ways of empire, of land appropriation, of population displacement, of violence and debt, and they have done so for their own comfort and their own privilege. Jesus' words, his actions in the temple, his very presence among them, remind them of God's commands, of God's hurt and anger over injustice, of their own complicity in the violence and violent systems of their day.

They are words for us to hear as well. In which ways are we living out God's commands for justice, for economic justice, for right relationships between us, for mercy and compassion? In which ways are we living out of and into the myth of fear and scarcity, holding onto our piece of the pie for dear life?

God cannot be the landowner in the parable, not as the crowds answer Jesus' question.

God is the one who brings salvation, who offers steadfast love, who desires justice, a jubilee for humans and the whole creation. Remember it is Jesus who stands in the temple and teaches about the kingdom. Jesus who willingly makes his way to a cross, who will not use violence against those who use violence, who will not use power over but choose instead what is weak so that we might see the kingdom of God break through in new and surprising ways. It is this Jesus who fulfills God's greatest command of love so that we can find ourselves on the other side of a tomb that stands empty and in a new day that breaks forth like the dawn. Amen.