

Mt 21:33-46 – “Tough Tenants”

I'm sure by now you've probably seen the items in the media about the “Minutemen” who are now patrolling the border along the south side of Zero Avenue, and presumably other parts of the border that abuts Washington State? While their passion and motivation seems honourable enough, still I keep recalling an announcer who said he couldn't hear about these happenings without the dueling banjo music from the movie “Deliverance” playing in his head. I have a slightly different perspective, and I would instead invite you to name two differences between a “Minuteman” and an “insurgent” (as the term is used these days).

Even President Bush has called these groups “vigilantes”, and since he's from rural Texas he if anyone should be able to recognize a vigilante! I can even recall when vigilante justice was given tacit approval as a ‘solution’ to an escalating teen gang problem in Sudbury, when the men of the neighbourhood took a rather “hands on” approach to rowdyism and property crime. There was such an incident not too long ago in which a group of neighbours took it upon themselves to oust the occupants of a “crack house” in their midst. The house was a rental, in very run-down condition, and was occupied by a varying number of drug addicts who used it as a place to shoot up and as a site for prostitution. These were tough tenants, not so much in the sense of being strong, like a biker gang, but tenants who made it tough on both the neighbours and the landlord. It's not easy for landlords these days to deal with such tough tenants.

Our gospel reading does at least remind us of the times when a landlord could act decisively against tough tenants, firmly tossing them out of the vineyard, with their beat-up furniture right behind them. However, there's a lot more to it than that.

On the surface this seems a normal enough parable, a story using items drawn from real life to illustrate a point. We have a landlord who invests his capital setting up a vineyard, a rather nice vineyard by the sound of it. On a hillside, as vineyards tend to be, nicely fenced and complete with a winepress. The only thing missing in the description is the Mission on the top of the hill overlooking the lake, but then Missions had not yet been invented! With such a beautiful vineyard, the landlord has no trouble renting it out, and even the rental terms seem fair, as he is looking for a share of the harvest instead of cash up front.

For a while, all goes well in this tiny corner of the promised land. The sun shines down, the rain fattens the grapes, and pretty soon there is wine to go along with the milk and honey. And of course that's when the trouble starts – when it comes time to pay the rent. The landlord sends some slaves to collect the rent, but they get trashed. Talk about tough tenants! The same fate descended upon a second set of rent collectors. (The landlord should have sent some of the landladies I've had over the years!) But with a surprising patience that we'll look at in a bit, the landlord next sends his son, thinking that this way he will get not only the rent but also a bit of respect. Alas, it is not to be, for these are truly tough tenants, and kill the son so that they can grab the vineyard now that there is nobody to inherit it. Naturally the question is raised about how the landlord would react to this travesty, and the chief priests and the Pharisees answer with enthusiasm that those tough tenants will finally reap not only a crop of grapes but the grapes of wrath.

Jesus agrees with them that wrath indeed would come, but in the form of ironic justice, raising images of being broken and crushed by “the stone the builders rejected

[that] has become the corner stone”. Now we expect the chief priests and Pharisees to catch on, because we declare that Jesus has as the risen Christ indeed become that corner stone. But how could they? Although we understand what Jesus meant, they couldn’t possibly hear it with the same meaning that we do. Where we retell the full story of his crucifixion and death and rising again, all they had was a face-to-face confrontation with a bizarre religious zealot talking about a vineyard and tough tenants and slaves and a son getting killed and a landlord taking revenge and capping it off with a curious quote from scripture. The chief priests and the Pharisees realized Jesus was targeting them with this story, but the references could not possibly have meant to them what they mean to us, and moreover they were afraid of the crowds’ reaction if they were to take action against this popular prophet.

So, is that the end of this story? Can we leave it here, smugly comfortable that we know who had the kingdom taken away from them, and even more smugly self-assured that it is us who are the new tenants? Many have done just that, and many still do, using this text as the foundation for an anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, hyper-Christian “nyah-nyah, you lose/we win” taunting. But doing that misses the whole point of the story, and fails to emphasise that WE are the new tough tenants.

Matthew signals clearly both at the beginning and the end of this incident for us not to miss that point. He begins the story with “listen to another parable ...”, and ends the story with “when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable ...” Matthew wants us to be absolutely clear that this is a parable, NOT an allegory. What’s the difference, you are probably asking, wondering if I’ve spent too many hours hitting the text books lately. There’s a huge difference, a difference that Matthew and his early readers would understand, and it’s a clue about the meaning. A parable is a self-contained story, the meaning of which is found within its own actions and characterizations. An allegory has its meaning in events and actions outside itself to which it refers. To identify the tenants as the Jews, the dispatched sons as the prophets, the killing of the son as the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, is to see it as an allegory, not as a parable, and the ‘bookend’ reminders that it is a parable should clue us into looking deeper. When we do that digging, what emerges is yet another message of God’s grace.

The incident in this text is one of the steps of the increasing controversy between Jesus and the religious and political leaders in Jerusalem, beginning with his crowd-stirring entry into the Holy City and emphasized by his cleansing of the temple and healing the sick in that same holy place. This exchange is best seen as part of Jesus’ counter-challenge to the authorities who challenged him; best understood as his claim that the scribes and the Pharisees had turned from God’s call to treat each other with love, kindness and respect, and that they had moved way too far into a position of legalism. Jesus would soon go on to berate them for their lack of compassion, for their burdening of the faithful with rules upon rules, for their forgetting God’s love and caring in their zeal to be pure.

That ancient struggle between those who see God’s grace and those who see God’s law continues even today. There are still many who would argue that rigid observance of the rules and the law of the Old Testament is still the only way to enter into God’s favour and kingdom. They miss the point of God’s pro-active grace that is evident even in this parable – miss seeing that the vineyard was created *already complete* with all necessities. The tenants were brought in with the expectation that they would pay the

rent after the harvest, not before! Those tough tenants were not condemned after their first rebellion in which they even stoned and killed the slaves sent among them. Neither were they condemned after the second round of rebellion. If the landlord was meant to represent God who would finally take action upon the killing of his son, then the landlord also represents God who provided for his people over the centuries, and who kept his covenant through rebellion after rebellion. This is the God of grace pictured here, slow to anger, full of deep compassion for his people.

No, the story does not end as this parable does with the tragedy of the tough tenants being displaced. It ends, as we who were wanting to cheer throughout the telling of it know, with the resurrection and restoration of that Son, now seated at the right hand of the ultimate landlord. It ends with the declaration (promise) not that the vineyard would be shut down, but that it would be re-let to new tenants.

Now here's a thought to ponder – we are the new “tough tenants!” As disciples and followers of the one whom we proclaim to be the son, killed as in the parable but now risen in glory, we understand ourselves to be the new tenants, and this gives the story a new ending, and thus a new meaning. Take note, if we are the new tenants, the implication is clear that we have a responsibility to pay the rent. Grace and mercy still apply – the rent is not due up front, as in righteous action before access to the vineyard, but as the harvest comes in, we are called to present the rent. There are implications here – tilling the soil, planting the seed, watering and feeding the tender plants, pruning the vines, guarding against frost and other chills. Some of the ways to do that are clear: proclaiming God's saving grace, feeding the hungry, helping the poor, healing the sick, expanding the kingdom -- all nurturing activities appropriate to the vineyard image. Other ways to pay the rent are not so clear, including pruning those things that harm or hurt the growing crop.

I guess it's a matter of focus – whether we Christian tenants in the vineyard see ourselves primarily as weeders, rooting out the undesirables, or as nurturers, working in every way we can to increase the yield at harvest time. I certainly prefer to be included with the latter, instead of being tough tenants looking forward in joyful anticipation to being invited to sit down with the landlord and his Son at the harvest banquet, to enjoy the fruits of the kingdom, to savour the wine and the bread.