

## Trinity 17

Explaining the parable of the tenants in the vineyard in this morning's Gospel, Jesus quotes from psalm 118[.22]

'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'

There, and more generally in the Psalms, the trials and defeats of Israel, even exile and the loss of the Temple, are seen as measures of strength, love and endurance. Despite all that they have endured, the people of Israel continue to sing of God's fidelity to them, and what marvels God has done before their eyes. Matthew now reports Jesus personifying this in himself, personifying the Israel that is rejected but becomes, despite all its sins and failures, the key building-block of a new edifice, taking on himself Isaiah's suffering servant role which we contemplate in Passiontide. Taken together with Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard, our first reading today, the parable of the wicked tenants is one of those Gospel moments when everything clicks.

Those breakthrough moments of insight into God, the world, or ourselves, are what I'm always waiting and hoping for in any theological book I open. But as S Therese of Lisieux reminds us, they are most often found in scripture, and especially in the Gospels: the Gospels are where the clearest theology is to be found, because they communicate who Christ is. S Therese wrote

... it is especially the Gospels which sustain me during my hours of prayer, for in them I find what is necessary for my poor little soul. I am constantly discovering in them new lights, hidden and mysterious meanings.

Elsewhere she added,

Sometimes, when I read spiritual treatises in which perfection is shown with a thousand obstacles, surrounded by a crowd of illusions, my poor little mind quickly tires. I close the learned book which is breaking my head and drying up my heart, and I take up Holy Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me; a single word uncovers for my soul infinite horizons; perfection seems simple; I see that it is enough to recognize one's nothingness and to abandon oneself, like a child, into God's arms. Leaving to great souls, to great minds, the beautiful books I cannot understand, I rejoice to be little because only children, and those who are like them, will be admitted to the heavenly banquet.

Matthew, writing for a generally Jewish audience, is especially good at presenting those flashpoint connections with the Jewish scriptural heritage which we share. Today he shows us how Jesus moves that narrative on, preparing to undergo, in his unique personhood as Son of God and Son of Man, rejection, death and resurrection, to become the *cornerstone* of our lifelong building project, our relationship with God.

We can do the same thing with our lives. All of us are conscious of facets of our personality or character of which we are ashamed or about which we despair.

Gossip, greed, past hurts and grudges, anger, sexuality or broken relationships, and so many other things, in our imperfections at living the Christian life, can discourage us. But we too can turn weak points into building blocks. Whether we work hard to overcome our weaknesses, or feel like giving up on ourselves, today's gospel speaks not just of Jesus and the great work of salvation, but also of every Christian, striving, like S Therese of Lisieux, to see our own small path to heaven:

'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone: this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes'.

As S Therese learned in one of her flashes of insight during that short and apparently insignificant life, the parts of our character we most despise may be openings for what we sing of as 'amazing grace', so long as we see them clearly and acknowledge them. Nothing is irredeemable to God; nothing has gone too far or become too entrenched. Christian life is not about shame but about repentance and starting again. Looking at things we have thought of only as problems provides us with the greatest potential for the flashpoint moments where the healing and love of Christ allow us to turn our lives around, to demolish the negative and defeatist self-talk in which we indulge, to rebuild ourselves with Christ as the cornerstone. Pope Francis, who believes in sitting with problems and letting dialogue and time lead us to the right path under God, rather than always seeking the overt control of imposed solutions, admires S Therese,

"When I have a problem I ask the saint, not to solve it, but to take it in her hands and help me accept it."

As he writes elsewhere, her lesson for us is that we can, we must, depend solely on the *tenderness* of God.

Today's parable speaks to us about the loving patience of God: when his servants are killed he sends more and more in the hope that people will turn from their evil ways. Even when these are killed, still he hopes, hopes that his beloved Son will lead his people to change their ways. Jesus is God's last appeal, his final loving challenge and invitation, but although it is final it does not cease with the Cross. There is also Resurrection. We have a daily opportunity to respond. We, not some past 'they', are now the tenants, *we* are subject to God's expectation of us. God looks to *us* for the fruits of faith and love and obedience; God hopes that we will deliver forgiveness, mercy and justice. Today's parable addresses the question to each of us: are forgiveness, mercy and justice the fruits we produce?