

Mark 12.1-12

Last night, at our Holy Week Prayers we remembered that the Monday of Holy Week speaks to us of Jesus “Cleansing the Temple” so that it might be a house of prayer for all nations. For Jesus, God’s love and mercy were not just for one people but for all.

Today we remember that throughout those last days of his life Jesus continued to be a teacher. So we have read the story that Mark places in these last days. As so often, we wonder about the original story and how the story was changed in the light of Jesus death and resurrection. I think we can see that the original story was a passionate plea by Jesus that his own people should not reject him.

As with all the parables the setting is one which was familiar to all who heard it. The landlords established the farms with all that was needed to make them profitable but most of them didn’t live on or near their land. They chose to live in the town and cities but they expected to be paid their annual rent.

(This story always reminds me of our history master at school. He commented on the claim that America is God’s own country by saying that in his opinion it was the worst case of an absentee landlord he’d ever come across.)

The landlord in our story faces a rebellion from his tenants and assaults the servants who come to him. In the end he sends his son who comes with authority to act on behalf of his father. The tenants decide to kill the son and to take possession of the land. The outcome is swift. The land is taken away from them and given to others.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the vineyard is a symbol of Israel itself. It is expected to be a fruitful people through their trust in God and obedience to him. Jesus in the original parable is warning the nation, as Jeremiah and Isaiah did five hundred years before, that when Israel ignores what God is saying to it it faces loss and destruction.

After the death of Jesus and his resurrection this parable is seen in a new way. Jesus becomes the focus of this parable.

The Son becomes none other than Jesus himself
who is killed outside the city of Jerusalem
at the instigation of his own people.

Nor is that the end.

A Psalm expresses the faith of the church:

***The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.***

The one who was rejected has become the cornerstone
of a new community which is now predominantly gentile.
The new people of God is not confined to those who are Jewish
but becomes a people drawn from all races and cultures.

There is nothing which the Jewish people did to Jesus
which has not been done to him in the history of the church.
Through the centuries,
we have so often turned his challenge to radical obedience,
to a life of self-giving love,
into something comfortable and at ease with our times.....
We have allowed the challenge of Jesus to be muted
and to become confined to attending worship
and accepting without question the way things are.

Of course, there have always been those who have challenged the status quo,
who have rocked the boat and made people look and listen once again
at the life and words of Jesus.

This Holy Week we may ask what it means to give
to the God we meet in Jesus
what we owe to him!
What is asked of us as we live our lives
in this kind of a world and this kind of a church?
What does he want of us as a people and as individuals....?

As the hymn asks: "What shall we render to our God?"
In Jesus' name. Amen.