

A Reflection from Revd Liz Jones ~ Trinity 17 Parable of the Tenants ~ Matthew 2: vs 33-end

Autumn is one of my favourite times of the year. I really enjoy a sunny autumn day. The heavy dew on the grass in the morning and the colours that we see at this time of year, particularly the leaves on the trees, green, golden, turning to a russet brown. This is harvest time, there are signs of it all around us (for those who live in a rural setting) we see the fruits of this harvest time. In my garden as I look out of the lounge window we have a line of apple trees. They are weighed down with lovely red apples – bramleys I think!

I was sat the other morning as I was preparing this talk and at first glance the apples all seem the same but then as you look closer you see that they are all unique some redder than others and some larger, some shiny, some with little marks on them.

What always amazes me when I look at those trees is how the harvest is produced every year. In about 3 months' time, those trees will be bare of the fruit and the leaves, they will look dead and it is hard to imagine how they will become fruitful. Yet each year, in spring, new buds will form and through the summer time the fruit will grow and develop until it is ready for harvest. So it is with physical harvest of produce, the food that is offered at harvest time, grown carefully during the year.

Last week we had our Harvest Service outside the church building under a gazebo. There were just a few of us, what was lovely to see was how the fresh food offerings which were mainly fruit were auctioned at the end of the service with the proceeds of that going to the food bank. It was a joyful service and there was a real sense of community and sharing together even though we were socially distanced and wearing masks.

As I reflected upon this I was really touched by how God's people can keep sharing God's kingdom and the fruits of our labours with others, this is very different from the parable of the tenants that we hear in our gospel reading today. In the parable which follows immediately after the parable of the two sons, Jesus describes a situation where a vineyard is rented to some farmers and when the harvest time approaches the owner of the vineyard sends his servants to collect his fruit from the farmers. Twice the owner sends servants and each time they are beaten and killed. Then the owner sends his son thinking that his son would be respected but the son is also killed.

Quite a shocking story ... This is neither Jesus' first nor his last confrontation with the Pharisees. Many of us will tend to avoid those with whom we have conflict and confrontation. But not Jesus. He just keeps on coming. At every turn he is offending, aggravating, and confronting the Pharisees. He eats with the wrong people. He won't answer their questions. He taunts them by breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. He calls them hypocrites and blind leaders. He escapes their traps. He leaves them speechless. He rattles off a string of "woes" against them. He compares them to a disobedient son who will not work in the vineyard.

We may wonder - what does that have to do with us? This parable can be seen as a warning to the Pharisees, a sort of wake up call for them to change, but also it shows how Jesus is unwilling to give up on the Pharisees, or anyone else for that matter. Jesus is unwilling to give up on you or me. He just keeps on coming. That is the good news, there is some hope, and joy in today's parable. This is not so much a parable of exclusion or condemnation as it is a parable of Jesus' unwillingness to give up. His unwillingness to give up on us often confronts us with truth about our lives that is almost always difficult to hear and accept. We might hear his words but do we realize that they are also meant for us as well?

This parable and the confrontation this parable provokes, are like a mirror held before us so that we might see and recognize in ourselves what Jesus sees and recognizes. This is not to condemn

us but to recover us from the places of our self-exclusion, to call us back to life, and to lead us home. Jesus doesn't exclude us or anyone else from the kingdom of God. He doesn't have to. We do it to ourselves and we're pretty good at it. That's what the Pharisees have done. The Pharisees have excluded themselves. "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you," Jesus says to them. This is not so much a punishment for failing to produce kingdom fruits. It is, rather, the recognition of what already is. They were given the vineyard and failed to produce and share the fruits of the kingdom. Jesus is just naming the reality, the truth. They have excluded themselves. In the same way, the kingdom of God will be given to those who are already producing kingdom fruits. This is not a reward but a recognition of what already is. Where the fruit is, there also is the kingdom. The fruits of the kingdom are revealed in the life of God through Jesus Christ. What we can see are: Love, intimacy, mercy and forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, presence, wisdom, truth, healing, reconciliation, self-surrender, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience, humility.

These fruits can be seen as lived realities in the vineyards of our lives. We've all been given vineyards. They are the people, relationships, circumstances and events of our lives that God has entrusted to our care. That means our spouse and partners, children and family, our work, our church, our daily decisions and choices, our hopes, dreams, and concerns are the vineyards in which we are to reveal the presence and life of God, to produce the fruits of the kingdom. The vineyards, our work in those vineyards, and the fruit produced come together to show us to be sharers in God's kingdom; or not. So as we reflect and ponder on this parable, I encourage you to think about how you can share God's fruits of his kingdom with others. What can each one of us do to be witnesses to Christ through our daily lives?

To conclude – a poem which I often use at a funeral:

All that really matters

All that really matters is the way in which we live, the way we face our troubles and the happiness we give. The way we deal with others whom we contact on life's way, the way we work the things we think and the sort of prayers we say.

All that really matters is our attitude of mind, The way we meet life's rough and smooth and the setbacks that we find. The way we try to right the wrong and the way we check despair, The way we use our talents and the things for which we care.

All that really matters is the character we build, the way we shape its glory by the missions we've fulfilled. The rays we cast through goodness across the ways we've trod, these are the things that matter to ourselves as well to God.

Amen.