

WEEK 4: THURSDAY

I was taking a service in a local church when this passage was the second reading. Over at the side of the church was a family with a three-year-old boy who appeared to be playing with his toys, taking no notice of the service. But when the reader finished this parable, about the wicked tenants who beat up the owner's messengers and finally kill his son, there was a momentary pause; and, in the silence, the boy's voice stood out loud and clear: 'That's not a very nice story!'

Well, no, it isn't, and that's part of the point. We come to the gospels hoping and imagining that they are going to be 'nice'; that we will find a Jesus who tells us it's all right, we don't have to worry, nobody's going to get hurt, no one will even be cross. But with the world the way it is, if God doesn't get cross about it he is not a good God. If he doesn't do something about it, sooner or later, he's quite simply not God.

The whole New Testament is based on the belief that in Jesus of Nazareth the living God took the world into his hands at last in judgment and mercy. When I say 'took it into his hands', there are various different meanings there, which have to be explored in due course. Tragically, it was God's own people, Jesus' own people, Israel itself that stood in the way of what God was wanting to do.

In the Bible, the 'vineyard' is often used as an image for the people of Israel. In the old prophets, the vineyard has often gone wrong, gone wild, rebelled against its planter. In this story, though, it's the tenants who are at fault. The 'vineyard' itself seems to be God's inner purpose, Israel as the bearer of his saving plan for the world. As in the Old Testament, God sent prophets to his people, but his people refused to listen. Now at last he is sending his son — and his people, instead of listening, think that if they kill the son they can have the vineyard for themselves.

This is at the heart of it. Jesus' challenge to Israel — that it was time at last for God to become king, and that this was happening through him and his work — was too much. As with the young man two chapters earlier, his contemporaries couldn't match the total demand of God's kingdom. And, to explain the result, Jesus called on other biblical images: the stone that won't fit the wall but will go nicely at the very top (Psalm 118.22—23), and the stone that will crush all opposition (Daniel 2.34). The English words 'son' and 'stone' are very similar; in the same way the Hebrew words ben (son) and eben (stone) are very much alike. The rejected son, like the rejected stone, will become the Lord of all and judge of all.

This parable is Jesus' own explanation for what was happening. Once again, telling cryptic stories is the only way you can say the really important things. As we watch, we find ourselves drawn into the action. Are we part of the group that don't want the Owner to take control of his own vineyard? Would we rather keep it for ourselves?

TODAY

Almighty God, give us grace to produce the fruits of your kingdom, that we may celebrate your Son, the chief cornerstone of your new Temple.