

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

When I looked at the readings for today, I was tempted to just preach on St. Francis. However, these difficult passages are what motivated me to study the Bible and theology. I wanted to understand what these scriptures could mean, to learn the context and intent of the original author. Who were they speaking or writing to and what was their motivation?

And I confess that this week's Gospel reading is one I classify as a "difficult teaching and hard to understand." Not because the meaning of the parable is obscure, but rather because there are a few very difficult sentences in it. Jesus' parable draws on our reading from Isaiah this morning, which the psalm also echoes. The vineyard is one of the Bible's richest recurring images, and it develops considerably from the Hebrew Bible into the Gospels. At its heart, the vineyard represents God's relationship with a people, the gift of creation, human responsibility, and the fruit God hopes to find in the life of the community.

The prophets take the image of a vineyard and use it to speak about Israel's relationship with God. Isaiah's song of the vineyard portrays God as the one who carefully plants, tends, and protects the vineyard, expecting it to produce good grapes. Jeremiah uses similar language when God says, "I planted you as a choice vine." The question running through these passages is what has happened to something that God planted and tended so carefully.

Ezekiel uses the image in two different ways. In chapter 15, the prophet asks what a vine is good for if it bears no fruit. Its purpose is not simply to exist, but to

produce what it was planted to produce. In chapter 19, the vine becomes an image for Israel's royal house. Again, the image is about something that was planted, given the possibility of flourishing, but failed and was destroyed.

But the vineyard is not only an image of failure and judgment. Micah gives a picture of peace and security: "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4) The vineyard can therefore represent the life God desires for the people: security, abundance, peace, and the ability to enjoy the fruit of the land without fear.

By the time we come to Jesus, the vineyard has become a familiar biblical image for the people of God and for God's kingdom. In Matthew 20, Jesus tells a parable about workers being called into a vineyard throughout the day, and the story becomes a way of talking about the astonishing generosity of God versus the meritocracy of humanity. In Matthew 21, Jesus takes up the older prophetic image again in the parable we hear today. And then, in John 15, Jesus transforms the image once more: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." Now the emphasis is on relationship and dependence. The branches bear fruit because they remain connected to the vine.

So the vineyard image moves through Scripture with a remarkable consistency. It begins with gift: God plants and provides. It moves to responsibility: those who receive the gift are expected to tend it and bear fruit. It becomes a question of faithfulness: what kind of fruit is actually growing? And finally, in Jesus, it becomes an image of relationship: the fruit comes from remaining connected to the source of life. The vineyard, then, is never simply about grapes. It

is about what we do with what has been entrusted to us, and about the kind of community that grows from God's gifts.

And that brings us to the difficult part of this morning's Gospel. Today's passage has been used as a foundation for the anti-Jewish belief that God rejected his chosen people the Jews and chose his new people, the church. This attitude resulted in close to 1900 years of persecution, culminating in the holocaust. That's a very serious consequence for what I believe is a critical misunderstanding of this passage.

So, let's set some context. Within this chapter of Matthew 21 there are a few references to both John the Baptist and Jesus being prophets and not being believed by the Jewish leaders. The servants sent to collect the harvest can be seen as prophets rejected, beaten and killed by the tenants, which are the chief priests and the Pharisees who are supposed to be taking care of the vineyard, that is the people of God. This parable is recalling today's passage from the prophet Isaiah which the audience would have known very well. The parable starts with the story of the landowner who carefully plants a vineyard and provides for its protection and nurture, a wall, a well and a watchtower. This recalls Isaiah 5: "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it." Instead of the vineyard producing choice grapes, they were bitter wild grapes. The vineyard is often used as a metaphor for Israel. Isaiah is condemning the people of Israel for not being a righteous people as he says in verse 7: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" As we often read in the

major and minor prophets the elite of Israel are condemned for not looking after the poor, marginalized, and the stranger among them. God expects them to be a holy people as he is holy, and they fail miserably. In return, Isaiah promises that God will destroy the vineyard, that is, the nation of Israel, or at least their leaders and the elite among them. So keep this in the back of your minds as we explore this parable some more.

In this passage we have another case where it just doesn't sound like Jesus. At the end of the parable, the tenants are put to a miserable death. That doesn't sound like a loving and forgiving God does it? But remember that the story of the vineyard in Isaiah is behind this parable. The audience expects destruction at the end of the story. So much so, that when Jesus asks what will happen at the end of the parable, the Pharisees themselves answer him in verse 41 "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

This now leads to the second difficult verse in this passage. Immediately after this statement of destruction Jesus quotes from Ps. 118:22–23: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.²³ This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes."

Now that sounds like good news, right? Except, Jesus then says that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to people who produce fruit. First, that doesn't make sense! It doesn't seem to connect to the cornerstone quote at all! **What** is going on here? It gets more confusing as Jesus then states that anyone who stumbles on this stone will be broken and it will crush anyone on whom it falls. How can it be **both** on the ground **and** fall from above? Well, let's

look at another passage from Isaiah, which also mentions a cornerstone. Isaiah 28 is another condemnation of corrupt rulers and priests. In the midst of the promise of destruction Isaiah writes: “¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: ‘One who trusts will not panic.’ ¹⁷ And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plummet.” Plummet is a plumb line, a string with a heavy weight attached to one end that uses gravity to find a straight vertical direction. In other words, Justice and righteousness are the measure that God uses. Everything must align to them.

Ok, so here we have both a foundation stone and a cornerstone, one is a stone in the foundation of a building, and the other is typically the stone at the top of two walls where they meet. Word play is characteristic of Hebrew poetry and prose. Words are frequently interchanged, and the meaning stretched a little to make a point. So let's just accept that one could both stumble upon and be crushed by the stone. To what does the stone refer? In Isaiah, it is the foundation of righteousness and justice. In Psalm 118, the stone is a messianic figure. In Matthew it is Jesus, the Messiah who preaches a gospel of righteousness and justice. How cool is that!?

There are two other very critical pieces of context to understanding this passage. The first, which I already mentioned in passing but I want to make very clear, is that all the prophets condemned the leaders, the elite of the Jewish nation just as we see in this passage. It does not mean the whole people of Israel; it means specifically those who are not loving God and their neighbour as themselves, those who are taking advantage of the poor for their own gain. The second is that at the time of Jesus there were many different Jewish sects, some of which were very

harsh critics of their fellow Jews, believing them to be corrupt and therefore outside the covenant. Therefore, this parable should be read as a condemnation of a certain set of unrighteous Jews, not all Jews. Indeed, God is not capable of walking away from his covenant. No matter how many times Israel, or we the church, violate that covenant, God is there waiting with outstretched arms to welcome us back. He asks us to be good tenants of his vineyard, and to bear fruits of righteousness and justice. Truly, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

And that brings us back to St. Francis. Francis took very seriously the call to follow Christ. He was not interested in simply believing the right things about Jesus. He wanted his whole life to be shaped by the life of Christ. Often attributed to him is the saying, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and use words if necessary.” Francis gave up wealth and social status and chose a life of poverty, simplicity, and service. But the point was never simply to have less. The point was to make room for more of Christ. In Philippians, Paul explains that he gave up his religious status, privilege, and security—counting it all as loss—so that he might gain Christ. For him, emptiness wasn’t the goal; Christ was. Francis understood that everything he had was a gift. His possessions, his relationships, his abilities, the natural world around him, even his own life, were not things to be grasped and possessed. They were gifts to be received and shared. His poverty was therefore not simply about what he gave up. It was about learning how to live with open hands.

And that in turn brings us back to the vineyard. The tenants in Jesus’ parable have forgotten that the vineyard belongs to the landowner. They have taken what was entrusted to them and treated it as though it were theirs. Francis offers us a

very different way of living. He asks what happens when we remember that our lives are gifts, that the world is God's, and that we are here to tend what has been entrusted to us.

Like Paul, and therefore not perfect, Francis gives us a remarkable picture of what it might look like to press on toward Christ, allowing our lives to be continually transformed by the one who has already laid hold of us. That is the fruit God asks of every generation: not perfection, but lives that are increasingly shaped by Christ; lives marked by justice, mercy, humility, compassion, and love.

Let us then be good tenants of God's vineyard, trusting the One who planted it, caring for what has been entrusted to us, and producing the fruit of justice, mercy, and love. Amen.