

Sermon for Trinity 17 2020

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4.1-3

The constant call of our faith is one which will encourage us to embrace the teaching of our Lord. ST Paul uses specific words to describe our call, “*humility, gentleness, patience, peace and love,*” These were not popular qualities in the early days of the church. Humility was weakness, gentleness indicated that the person was not strong and would be ineffective in battle, Patience was for the cowardly who would not strive to take that which they wanted. The teaching from Paul to the Ephesians was very confronting in that environment. Society was very focussed on strength, power, domination, and a demand for subservience.

If we take this reading into the Gospel, we recognise that the behaviour of our Lord is quite the opposite to that of the Pharisees. The parable of the wicked tenants is a powerful message for the Pharisees. The owner of the vineyard is God, the slaves are the prophets sent by God, and Jesus is the Son sent by God and who is in due course killed by the pharisees, or the tenants.

When Jesus asked the Pharisees what would happen when the owner returned they blurted out that which they had seen happen before. The owner of the vineyard would put the tenants to a wretched death, and he would appoint other, more loyal, and trustworthy tenants to maintain his fields.

God has given his people everything they need. He gave them the land in which they live. He gave them the bounty of the land. And all he asked was that the people remain faithful to him. This parable is primarily about the disobedience of God’s chosen people. It is in the conclusion to the reading that the Pharisees realised that Jesus was speaking about them. The reason that they did not arrest him was not because they feared God, but because they feared the crowds who regarded Jesus as a prophet. It seems that their fear was misplaced.

The lack of response for this challenge is the same as that in the reading last week. Last week they would not respond to Jesus question regarding the baptism of repentance offered by John the Baptist because they feared the crowds who had recognised John the Baptist as a prophet.

Like the slaves sent by the owner of the vineyard the prophets have been disregarded, abused, and in many cases, put to death.

It must be hard to hear the words and commandments of God if the messengers are killed or ignored.

This is where the pharisees are in this gospel today. They have turned away from God, they have ignored the call of God and they have created a religion that is, in many ways, opposed to faith. They have a book of rules which is extensive and complex. It is noted in scripture that no one could ever fully obey the Law now that it had become bogged down in trivia.

If their salvation depended on complete obedience to the Law, and not found in the spiritual dimension of faith, the future must have been very bleak indeed.

In the Gospel reading today Jesus is very specific in describing his own identity and the outcome for the pharisees. Jesus quotes Psalm 118 verses 22 and 23.

*'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;^[a]
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes'?*

In this quote Jesus is describing himself as being the stone that was rejected by the pharisees. More than this he is describing himself as the keystone, the shaped stone that is the final stone place in an arch. If the keystone is removed the entire arch will collapse. If we think of the term "cornerstone" and that stone is removed then there is nothing to hold the walls erect, and they will fall.

Jesus is the key stone, the cornerstone, the one who has come from God and who will take us back to God. During his earthly life he was distrusted, abused, doubted, threatened, and finally condemned. We look back on that scene and simply shake our head. How could they not see Jesus as the Son of God? How could they ignore the prophets? How could they take Jesus and crucify him?

The fact that the prophets had spoken about this does not make the outcome any clearer. The prophets knowing that this would happen does not somehow make it right. In fact, it is quite the opposite. If the chosen people had listened to the prophets and had turned back to God, there may have been an alternative to the death of the Son of God. Speculation now of course, however, one cannot help but wonder.

When Jesus tells the Priests and the Pharisees that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom they still did not believe him. Their response was to exercise their power, their strength, their dominance, and have Jesus removed from society.

I wonder what would have happened had the priests and the pharisees recognised the power of God in our Lord Jesus. Would they have followed him on the path that Paul teaches? Would they have recognised their own self-righteousness and arrogance and changed their ways? Would they have recognised in Jesus the beauty and the harmony of the qualities of humility, gentleness, patience, and love? Would they have come to proclaim the Trinity of God with the time tested acclamation of One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all, and in all?