

Sunday Message

THE WORD

Year A • Psalter Week 3

THE LORD'S VINEYARD

(MATTHEW 21:33-43)

Once again, we come across the symbol of the vineyard. In the Hebrew Bible, this image is often used in relation to Israel, and we found it in the parable of the generous owner who paid all his workers at the same rate.

Jesus tells this parable we hear today to the chief priests and elders, who have a position of authority among the people, and therefore one of responsibility for their wellbeing and care. The thrust of the parable concerns the Jewish leaders' plot to have Jesus killed: Matthew thus presents their treatment of Jesus as being in line with previous leaders' conduct towards the earlier prophets (although there is no evidence of any biblical prophets being murdered). We might remember that Matthew's community has a good proportion of Jewish members, so the rejection he speaks of is of the Jewish leaders, and not Israel as a whole. It is the tenants who are replaced, not the vineyard itself. Perhaps the better understanding of the expression that the kingdom of God will be "given to a people who will produce its fruit" is that it applies to the leaders of the Jewish-Christian community of which Matthew is a member. ■

SAY

**Jesus is the true vine:
we are his branches.
(see John 15:5)**

LEARN

The vineyard is a symbol frequently used in the Bible to represent Israel.

The chief priests and elders were essentially political figures: their power base was the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus was put to death on a political charge, which was published on the inscription on the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

DO

Find out if there is an ecumenical or interfaith group in your local area: consider going to a meeting to discover what members of other denominations or religions actually are like, and what they really believe.



REFLECT

A worrying phenomenon in recent times has been the rise of prejudice against all sorts of people. Suspicion of "foreigners", immigrants, people seeking asylum and refuge has become commonplace throughout the northern hemisphere. The return of antisemitism especially has been noticeable in many quarters. In the past, this has been fuelled especially by texts from the Gospels according to Matthew and John, which have been interpreted as laying the blame for the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus squarely at the feet of the Jewish people as a whole. The Christian Church was portrayed as the true Israel, replacing God's covenant with Israel.

Critical scholarship of the New Testament has called into question this blanket blaming of the entire Jewish people: the leaders, chiefly concerned with the political implications of Jesus' teaching being a threat to their social position, were the ones who brought about Jesus' death, and had him executed, not as the Son of God, but on the political charge of claiming to be "the King of the Jews". Given the fact that the early Church existed in the Roman Empire, it was diplomatic to shift the responsibility for the crucifixion away from the Roman authorities and onto the Jewish leaders.

We might remember that one of the ingredients which went into the writing of the Gospels was the situation of the community in which the evangelist, in this case, Matthew, was at work. So the hostility between Jesus and the leaders of his time reflects the later difficulties between the Church and the synagogue. Jesus was a Jew, and many of his teachings are in harmony with those of rabbis whose sayings have come down to us through the writings of their disciples. Pope Francis has shown by his actions the importance of respect for people of other faiths, especially Jews and Muslims, out of which genuine friendship can grow. ■