

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 4, 2020

ISAIAH 5:1-7 | PSALM 80:7-15 | PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14 | MATTHEW 21:33-46

Today's gospel reading is a sort of Holy Week story six months too late (or six months too early). Jesus has triumphantly entered Jerusalem and is confronting the religious authorities when he drops a parable that is deeply disturbing. It's violent. It's ominous. And, to make matters worse, the whole thing seems to be wrapped up in a very nasty kind of anti-Semitism.

A very common interpretation of this parable would go something like this. The vineyard represents the people of Israel. The workers who are sent to the vineyard are the prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, etc. But the Israelites don't like these prophets telling them how to run the vineyard, so they kill them. Eventually God figures they'll take his son seriously, so he sends Jesus. But the workers kill him, too. And then the story ends with God deciding that these Israelites aren't really worth the hassle anymore, and he might as well just give the vineyard to some people who will actually appreciate it. So let's give it to, I don't know, the Gentiles.

What makes that all too common interpretation anti-Semitic is not its suggestion that the Israelites didn't listen to the prophets. If you've read any of Gerry Lauro's reflections on the prophets, you know that the Israelites usually didn't listen to the prophets. Where that interpretation goes awry is when it assumes that the Gentiles would have listened to the prophets. We overestimate our ability to discern, hear, and welcome the wisdom of God in our midst. It's as if we read the story of Holy Week and say, *This would have gone down a lot different if people like me had been around.*

And there's another problem here, too. That interpretation doesn't just suggest that Gentiles are more spiritually enlightened than Jews, but it suggests that God can simply replace one community of people with another. If God's covenant with the Jews doesn't work out, we can just scrap it and move onto something else.¹ If you think this is just obscure first century Biblical interpretation that doesn't show up in the real world, remember the infamous chant from the 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville: Jews will not replace us. The word that should set off your theological alarm bells there isn't "Jews" or "us" so much as "replace." Because many of these people who believe they are being "replaced" take it for granted that one replacement has already happened. That the new covenant supersedes the old, that church replaces Israel, and that Christianity makes Judaism obsolete.²

But this interpretation isn't just problematic because it's anti-Semitic. It's also problematic because it's wrong. It misses the whole point of the Holy Week encounters. The problem with the Jewish authorities in this story is not that they are Jewish. It's that they're authorities. To be blunt, they're people like me.³ There is a reason Jesus doesn't give these kinds of harsh indictments to the

¹ This is often called "supersessionism." Definitions are a little slippery since the term is used mostly by critics, but one simple definition is that "Israel does not have a future in the plan of God and the role of Jewish people in the economy of salvation was purely predatory." Adam Sparks, *One of a Kind: The Relationship between Old and New Covenants as the Hermeneutical Key for Christian Theology of Religions* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010).

² Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010) has an interesting discussion of how supersessionist thinking reinforced the construction of whiteness in the evangelization of the "new" world. Supersessionist ideas originate from the experience of the early church, but they manifest themselves along contemporary power structures, in this case the construction of race, that don't seem related at first glance.

³ Rowan Williams suggests, "In the liturgical reading of the passion as it is now practised in churches, the crowd's part is normally taken by the whole congregation together - certainly an acknowledgement of what the Holy Week liturgy often reinforces, i.e. that the only example that matters in the worship of an unfaithful and rebellious people is us, the present worshipping body. It might not be a bad idea, however, for this to be spoken by the clergy, in acknowledgement of the particular role Matthew gives to those who act as guardians of the history and integrity of the

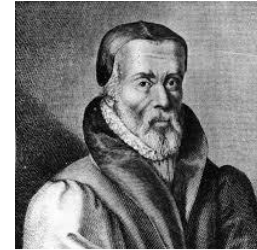
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people he randomly bumps into out by the Sea of Galilee. These religious leaders are people entrusted with preserving the wisdom of the community. And in this encounter, we discover that these leaders have become so inwardly focused on preserving their own power and maintaining the status quo that they are confronted with Wisdom itself and can't recognize it. They reject it.

When you understand the parable that way, you begin to realize that it's not just a parable about "them." It's a parable about "us." If the violence of this parable makes us uncomfortable, best avoid reading church history. We reject the prophets, too. We shun, ostracize, and, in some cases, kill people who make us reconsider our place in the world and where our responsibilities lie. Prophets aren't a threat to us because they're wrong. Prophets are a threat to us because they might be right.

William Tyndale, whose feast day is this Tuesday, is a good example of this. Tyndale was an English theologian during the Reformation, the most important English translator until the advent of the King James Bible. And much of his writing was about money and debt. He thought that many people tried to make others, including God, feel indebted to them. We do favors for others so that they owe us something. We might even go to church so that God owes us something. And then we try to get ahead in life by calling in those debts.



Tyndale

Tyndale said this is completely backwards. And that we would be truly free if we lived like we were indebted to others.⁴ In one of his books, Tyndale even said that you should live like you're indebted to infidels. (His editors found this so outrageous that they put it in brackets.) In short, Tyndale believed that religious life shouldn't just be a kind of gloss on our current practices, but that it should create an entirely new way of living that called into question the power structures of medieval Europe. He was burned at the stake.⁵

And that's the central irony. The same people who would tell you that this parable is about how Jews have given up their covenant with God because they didn't know how to listen to the prophets were the same people tying the William Tyndale to the stake and lighting a match.⁶

The root of the problem for the tenants, and perhaps for us, is that they misunderstand what their responsibility is. The tenants kill the son because they think then they will inherit the vineyard. But we know that's not how inheritance works. You can't kill your way into the line of inheritance. They want to achieve, take, grab something that can only be received as a gift. And by their grasping, their violence, and their scheming, they end up destroying the gift itself in the process. You don't lose the kingdom of God when God takes it away. You lose the kingdom of God when you try to

people." The last line here makes the point clear. Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).

⁴ This is sort of reminiscent of Luther's claim in "The Freedom of a Christian" that, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

⁵ For a brief history of Tyndale, including drama with Henry VIII, see Bill Broadway, "DANGEROUS READING IN ITS DAY," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/06/14/dangerous-reading-in-its-day/57a4136d-1168-40d4-adb6-eeab72f66154/>.

⁶ MLK is a good contemporary(ish) example of someone being vindicated and canonized by history. Only a tiny fraction of Americans have a negative view of King today, but well over half did in 1966. We would like to think that we would have supported King at the time, but most people would have been complaining that he was moving too fast or demanding too much. Gallup Inc, "Americans Divided on Whether King's Dream Has Been Realized," Gallup.com, August 26, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/149201/Americans-Divided-Whether-King-Dream-Realized.aspx>.

achieve it by getting rid of people who question your vision. Jesus isn't describing some hypothetical situation. He's just describing the way we operate.

And yet, the kingdom still emerges despite our best efforts. As Tyndale's translation of this parable puts it, "The stone which the builders refused the same is set in the principal part of the corner: this was the lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes."⁷ Our rejection of the prophets is evil and short-sighted and cause for repentance, but it can never extinguish their witness. The Spirit of God that animates the lives of the prophets and God's Son alike, is never constrained by our efforts to keep it out. To the contrary, Jesus says, the stone that we rejected has become the cornerstone.

When we push away the love of God, it only draws nearer. When we try to silence the words of the prophets, they only grow louder. And when we try to bury those who question us, they become seeds that bear the fruit of the kingdom.

Does that mean that our actions don't matter? That we can just kill the prophets and let history vindicate them? Of course not. It only means that even in situations that seem irredeemable, there is cause for hope. There is hope even for people like us who can't see the wisdom of God when it is standing right in front of us.

That is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Because it means that there is more grace in God than evil in us. That justice trumps oppression. That life trumps death. That even, despite our frequent efforts to the contrary, the kingdom of God is laid around us brick by brick and stone by stone.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁷ David Daniell, *Tyndale's New Testament* (Yale University Press, 1995), 49.