

Mark 12:1-12 [13-17] - Lent 3

The narrative in Part Two of Mark's Gospel slows down and broadens out. The impression created is that the events occur within six days. The closer to the crucifixion, the more details we are given about time and place. A full one third of Mark's narrative is devoted to a few days in Jesus' ministry; **one-sixth** is devoted to his last two hours. What happens in Jerusalem clearly overshadows everything that has taken place so far.

We are now in Jerusalem. However, we will return to the actual entry on Palm Sunday. It has been suggested that it would make more sense to talk about Jesus' entry to the temple rather than Jerusalem. Jesus sets up with his disciples on the Mount of Olives - a kind of base camp for his multiple trips to the temple. During his first trip to the temple, Jesus cleans house! "My house shall be called a house of prayer ..." he shouts as he overturns the tables of the money changers.

Returning to the temple, Jesus engages in a series of dialogues with Jewish leaders. The stories and events in this second part of Mark's Gospel are clearly designed to demonstrate that the Heir of the Vineyard has come to overturn the practices of the temple and many of the teachings of the Jewish tradition. The cleansing initiates a series of tense encounters between Jesus and the Jewish leadership. The Jewish leaders have three main questions for Jesus: questions about Jesus' authority, questions about taxes to Caesar, and questions about resurrection.

Whenever a prophet starts a vineyard story, you know it's going to end badly for you. The crowd likely had plenty of experience with absentee landlords who were not rightly the Lord of the vineyard. Both the parable and the question about taxes owed to Caesar and the coin are about who you think is actually in charge around here. Both the parable and the question about the coin are about giving to God from the blessings God has originally given

us. Caesar takes what is his by force. God receives what is given through devotion and love.

Caesar is the image on the coin, but have you ever considered whose image is on you? Man-made versus God-created. We are his image. So give to Caesar what is his, but first and foremost give all of yourself to God for his image is on you.

Today's story stresses the hostility between Jesus and the Jerusalem leadership, taking on the familiar form of a parable, an agrarian tale with a violent twist. This parable of the wicked tenants is an implied allegory in which the allegorical elements are obvious to the readers.

A vineyard was picture language for the Jewish nation. Isaiah had used this picture in his 'Song about the Vineyard,' which we just heard. Jesus described the care that the owner had taken. There was a hedge to keep out wild animals. The tower, a small building, was used to store the wine. At harvest time, the workers would watch from the platform, guarding the crop from thieves.

The grape juice flowed into the pit that had been dug after the workers had pressed the grapes with their feet. God was like the owner of the vineyard. God had done everything necessary to protect the Jewish nation. They should have been a nation that produced 'fruit' in the form of justice and righteousness.

In Jesus' time, it was not uncommon for owners to go away and leave their vineyards in the care of tenants. The tenants would pay the owner rent, either in money or in a share of the crop. The tenants obviously represented the Jewish leaders. God had trusted the leaders to be obedient, to produce the 'fruit' of good lives - lives of justice and righteousness. The owner of the

vineyard sent a series of servants to collect the owner's share of the produce.

The servants sent to collect the harvest, represented the prophets who had preached to the leaders. God had sent them on many occasions to demand sincere worship and justice. The rulers of the Jewish nation had refused to respect the prophets. Israel rejected them and tormented them. They insulted Amos. They made fun of Jeremiah. They struck him and put him in prison. They killed Zechariah. God showed great patience as he sent prophet after prophet. He gave the Jewish people every opportunity to do what was right.

In the end, God sent 'his son, whom he loved', recalling the words used at his baptism and Transfiguration, confirming Jesus as Messiah. In the parable, the tenants murdered the son. Jesus showed that he was well aware of his fate. God (the landowner) finally sent his "beloved son", thinking that the tenants would certainly respect the heir, the future ruler of the vineyard. However, the tenants reveal the depth of their unfaithfulness by killing the heir, the beloved son. This theme will carry Part Two of Mark's Gospel just as the Parable of the Sower carried Part One.

The religious leaders realised that Jesus had told this story about them. They were the 'wicked tenants'. They wanted to arrest Jesus, but they were afraid of the crowd, afraid for their own safety. And if the crowd tried to prevent them from arresting Jesus, they might disturb the peace, inviting trouble from the Romans.

The parable is structured on a motif familiar among Jewish storytellers of the time. However, Jesus' version of the story is far more graphic and violent, so the actions of the tenants are even more shocking. In Jesus' story, the fault of the tenants is not simply a failure to produce grapes, but a treacherous series of responses to the landowner's representatives. At least five attempts are made to contact the tenants and receive what was due the landowner.

There is a clear escalation of ill treatment (beating, beating on the head, killing) and an equally clear intensification of the landowner's efforts; a slave, another slave, many others, and finally a beloved son. The landowner's hope is ardent and idealistic, but ultimately futile. The tenants at this point are not just evil but irrational. How do they hope to inherit the vineyard after acting so traitorously? The outcome is inevitable: judgment, retribution, and replacement.

The tenants believed the owner was far away or even dead. But the owner returned to punish them. People still think that they are free to act against God, forgetting that God knows what they are doing. God is very patient, but one day, God will act in judgement.

God would be the judge of the people, especially the leaders, who refused to obey his message. They would receive their punishment. And God would choose other people to serve him. They would come from every nation. In his first letter, Peter writes: "But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The owner will "destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others". God will destroy the Jewish leadership and give the leadership of the community, the vineyard, to Jesus and his followers.

Christian interpreters in a post-Holocaust context should never read: "he will give the vineyard to others" as a replacement theology. Jesus did not tell the parable to suggest that God was going to take the kingdom away from "Jews" and give it to "Christians". That is not only in the wrong historical period, but misses the point, which is about faithfulness, and never about ethnicity.

The critical issue in the parable is not the identity of the "others" but the

failure of the tenants to respond faithfully, in accordance with their tenant obligation, or, to step back from the world of the parable, in accordance with the covenant. The language of "vineyard" had long been a symbol for the promises of the Jewish covenantal community. Mark's vineyard language refers to qualities of the life in the Kingdom. God had left these qualities in the care of Jewish leadership.

Why did Jesus' story about wicked tenants cause offense to the scribes and Pharisees? It contained both a prophetic message and a warning. Isaiah had spoken of the house of Israel as "the vineyard of the Lord". Jesus' listeners would likely understand this parable as referring to God's dealing with a stubborn and rebellious people. This parable speaks to us today as well. It richly conveys some important truths about God and the way he deals with his people. It tells us of God's generosity and trust. The vineyard is well equipped with everything the tenants need.

There are three overrunning themes in this passage, the first of which pertains to the construction of a vineyard complete with a wall, a winepress and a watchtower. Though the vineyard Jesus described was not necessarily consistent with a first-century design, it was consistent with the vineyard described in Isaiah which was labelled as both fruitless and wicked.

Now the Pharisees were extraordinary Old Testament scholars who were required not only to memorize every passage of Scripture, but lengthy commentaries on it as well. So they no doubt recognized the vineyard that Jesus was evoking in his parable and were easily able to connect the spiritual implication that Jesus was applying to it.

They would have immediately recognized Isaiah's vineyard and understood that Jesus was speaking of the fruitless field that God had built and then had promised judgment, a judgment that at this time would have been applied to

Israel's destruction that had occurred at the hands of Babylon more than 500 years ago.

What they did not realize is that Jesus' use of this passage against them was still valid. For part of the Pharisees' offense of Jesus could have been derived from thinking that Jesus had misapplied this passage to them. This passage was likely considered obsolete from a prophetic standpoint, as it was believed that the passage had already seen its fulfilment centuries before; but Jesus wasn't simply using a fulfilled prophecy as a mere metaphor and he wasn't playing fast and loose with Scripture.

The passage has a double fulfilment as it well describes the events leading up to Israel's destruction in 70 AD as predicted by Jesus shortly before his death. The second theme in Jesus' parable is far more dominant and damning. The wicked tenants who not only refused to offer a share of the crops to the owner, but who killed the owner's messengers and eventually his son met a terrible end.

Though these tenants were originally endorsed by the vineyard's owner to represent him and to work his land, the tenants refused to honour the owner with faithful work and gratitude. Instead, plotting to overthrow the owner by mistreating his representatives, they were vainly hoping to steal his vineyard.

The Tenants refuse to give to the Owner what is owed. The religious leaders know that the parable is supposed to be about them, that they aren't giving to God what is God's. The story about the coin and taxes encourages the hearers to do what the leaders won't do - to give God what is God's.

The Pharisees' outrage grew as they realized that Jesus' parable was a parallel to their treatment of Jesus with the wicked tenants and linked their indiscretions with the wicked men who persecuted and killed the Old

Testament prophets. The final blow to the Pharisees comes in what seems like a strange metaphor crammed into the end of the parable. A rejected cornerstone is the conclusion to a parable about a fruitless field and wicked tenants. So, how does this fit in with the vineyard and wicked tenants?

The Pharisees certainly understood the quotation's application, and as they connected the dots, they hated Jesus all the more for his parable. For here was a complete indictment of the Pharisees' spiritual malpractice. The Pharisees are depicted as the builders, not as builders of God's Kingdom but as builders of their own kingdoms whose values and desires are inconsistent with the character and desires of God.

The Pharisees rejected Jesus in every way. They had rejected the chief cornerstone of God's kingdom because they lacked the spiritual capacity and spiritual hearts to see that their Messiah had come not as a conquering warrior, but as a humble servant who came to lift the burden of sin from his people. Again, the Jewish leaders should not be seen as the only "bad guys". Christians can certainly treat the cornerstone with disrespect, and Jews can (and some did and do) respond faithfully to God's revelation.

Jesus did not fit the Pharisees expectations because he did not value what they valued and he did not act as they acted. And since Jesus' values and practices were not consistent with their own, they hypocritically judged Christ as a sinner and a blasphemer while projecting their own sins onto him.

Jesus labelled the Pharisees as self-appointed thieves who ruled over a fruitless field who were willing to kill God himself for the field through his parable, and so they did kill Jesus. They killed the Messiah who was both God and man, and they did so according to God's perfect plan to free his people.

The owner went away and left the vineyard in the hands of the tenants. God, likewise trusts us enough to give us freedom to run life as we choose. This parable tells us of God's patience and justice. Not once, but many times he forgives the tenants their debts. But while the tenants take advantage of the owner's patience, his judgment and justice prevail in the end. Jesus foretold both his death and his ultimate triumph. He knew he would be rejected and be killed, but he also knew that would not be the end.

After rejection would come glory, the glory of resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father. How do we share in this glory? How do we submit to Jesus' kingly rule in our lives? Jesus promises that we will bear much fruit (certainly the fruit of peace, righteousness, joy, and much more) if we stand with him.

God also entrusts his gifts to each of us and he gives us work to do in his vineyard — the body of Christ. He promises that our labour will not be in vain if we persevere with faith to the end. We can expect trials and even persecution. But in the end we will see triumph by labouring for our God with joyful hope and with confidence in his triumph.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT -- MARCH 3, 2024

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and joy. As well, we bring our prayers and petitions for all the sick, the suffering, the marginalised, the refugees and the uprooted before God, knowing that God can dispel our darkness with the light of Christ.

As we reflect upon the World Day of Prayer, marked on March 1st, we pray for the unity of the Church. Let us pray for a deeper appreciation of our common baptism into the one body of Christ. Lord, sustain each of us and our communities as we continue on the path towards the unity you desire for all your disciples. May we and our communities also be lights and sources of hope that guide others to Christ Jesus.

Let us pray for our spiritual leaders and church authorities: BC Synod; Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders. Today we uplift Our Redeemer Lutheran in Penticton, Trinity Anglican + Lutheran Church in Port Alberni, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Let us pray for all the nations and communities who live with deep divisions, internal conflicts, and war. We pray for the people of Gaza surviving throughout the cold night. As people seek safety and food rations, hold your people tight. Over 100 people were shot and over 700 wounded as they approached the food trucks. May all violence and hate cease; may our cries for harmony reach those with the power to bring about a ceasefire. Be with the people of Ukraine as they enter the third year of the invasion of their country. Bring peace to South Sudan where more than 8 million have been displaced and thousands have lost their lives and continue to suffer from hunger and disease. Be with the people of Haiti who continue to be oppressed and terrorized by gangs

We pray for refugees and displaced people: that those who have lost their former way of life may be called forth to a new beginning; for the establishment of enduring peace throughout the world wherever there is conflict: that God will open new pathways to resolve conflicts and bring life-supporting aid and opportunities to provide for the well-being of all

people. We pray that all countries and communities living in peace reach out and offer the necessary resources and hope to their suffering siblings.

Let us pray for all those who bring the gospel to bear on the great ethical challenges of our times. Lord, may we each learn to play our part in mitigating the global economic and ecological disasters which bring human suffering and threaten your creation. For the extreme weather of our world, as fires in Texas (USA) ravage the landscape; deep snow blankets areas of California; for areas of Canada that face potential water shortages and drought in the months ahead; and melting Arctic ice caps teach us how climate changes are impacting us globally.

Gracious God, you are with us in the most difficult moments of our lives. We pray today for Alyx and her family. Surround them with your loving presence in the gentle hands and hearts that offer attendance to them this night. Give wisdom to the health care team and help them determine what care will be most helpful. Give Alyx and their family comfort as they wait and worry. Bring peace and courage. Hold them in your peace and grant them courage for each moment. We pray also for the community of Hope Lutheran, Nanaimo and Pastor Terry as they offer support and prayers.

Let us pray for all in need. Provide caring communities for all who are burdened by guilt, shame, substance abuse, mental health stressors; for those mourning the death of a loved one, that they may know the compassionate presence of Christ in their time of loss, and for those suffering emotionally, mentally, physically or facing a terminal illness: that they may surrender their life into God's embrace and experience God's abiding presence with them.

Let us pray in thanksgiving for those who, inspired by you, O God, have held an important place in our lives of faith, and for all who have reflected your forgiveness, compassion and love. May their gifts of grace and generosity inspire our own desire to give and to serve with our lives.

Almighty God, we offer prayers for those voices that have been silenced. We ask for your spirit of reconciliation to be near. We pray that there may be an end to bullying in schools, harassment in homes and workplaces, an end to domestic violence, and a reform of discriminatory laws and practices. May we learn the call to be bearers of peace and spread this vision through love and solidarity.

Passionate God, we are ever grateful for your love for us, for your patience and trust. This day we are thankful for the joys of community. We see signs of love everywhere -- from handshakes and hugs to conversations and praying for one another. We pray for our community, that you continue to be with us in our happiness and weariness, in our celebrations and struggles.

Through the lens of accompaniment, may we walk together in solidarity as we seek to actively listen to our partners and companions, sharing their joys and sorrows, and supporting them, just as they support us in ours.

Heavenly Father, when our wilderness journey ends and normalcy returns to our lives, remind us to look back and see where you carried us through, deepened our faith, and provided us with your loving care.

Fill us with your strength to resist the seduction of our foolish desires and temptations that lead us away from you, that we may walk in obedience and righteousness, rejoicing in you with an upright heart. Let us stand in "the bond of our common humanity" and sing, shout, and softly whisper: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!"

Amen.

Let us pray together the words Jesus taught us, saying...

Our Father ...