

### ***Broken on the Rock or Crushed under It***

In the name of him who has made us his own, dear friends in Christ: Have you ever noticed that our Lord Jesus in his dealings with people throughout his earthly ministry never leaves them with a lot of options? Think of the way he called his various disciples. He finds them where they're working at their jobs, maybe repairing a fishing net or like Matthew, sitting in his tax collector's booth. Up walks Jesus one day and says, "Hey you. Yes, *you*. Stop what you're doing. Come, follow me." There's no "come if you want to" or "come when you think you're ready"; no "let me talk to you about the bright future that could be yours in a career in the ministry"; nothing like that. It's just "Do what I tell you and do it now." You get the impression that he's not taking "no" for an answer. The one disciple who tried, Peter, who fell at Jesus' feet claiming to be unqualified saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man", was told to get up, stop the backtalk, and get to work – or words to that effect, anyway. Jesus didn't leave a lot of room for him to make choices.

And so far I've been talking about people who were generally friendly to Jesus. He treated his enemies in pretty much the same way. There's Saul of Tarsus, for example, who was just beginning to become famous as a great defender of Judaism and the foremost persecutor of the upstart cult of the Nazarene. Jesus meets him while he's hunting down Christians who are fleeing for their lives, knocks him flat in the dirt, blinds him so that he can't see, and says, "You're really beginning to irritate me, Saul. Let's see if we can't channel all that energy and enthusiasm you've got to accomplish something more positive for the kingdom of God." (Again, that's something of a paraphrase; but I think you get the idea. The point is that) Jesus didn't leave Saul with many options.

And that's what we see too in this morning's Gospel lesson. The incident takes place in the Temple courts on Tuesday of Holy Week. And just to give you some background here, for a long time now the opposition to Jesus has been growing. The religious leaders in Jerusalem have been keeping watchful tabs on him, and everything they've been hearing about him has caused their alarm and suspicions to increase. They don't like Jesus for a lot of reasons. They are jealous of his popularity. They are also frustrated by his teachings. He's not sticking to their traditions, and he has a way of explaining things from the Scriptures that are at once profoundly deep and yet so simple any child can understand. He's made them, the ones who are supposed to be the wise doctors of theology, look foolish on more occasions than any one of them cares to count. In addition to this they fear that he might be the spark that ignites a popular uprising against Rome, which, they are convinced, would be disastrous for their nation. They've made it very clear to Jesus that he is not welcome in Jerusalem – in fact, they have several times sought to seize and destroy him; but up to the present they've always backed down for fear of the crowd with whom he is all the rage. Now, though they plot against him behind the scenes, they watch what they say about him publicly.

Well, it's coming on to the season of Passover now. The city of Jerusalem is rapidly filling to overflowing with devoted Jews from all over the world who have come for the celebrations. And the whole town is abuzz with excitement and anticipation. Everyone wants to know if Jesus is going to be here too – and if he is, what wonderful things he might do. Many have begun to speculate openly that he could be the long-promised Messiah. And just to up the ante, about two weeks before the festivities are to begin, Jesus shows up briefly in town of Bethany – which is practically a suburb of Jerusalem. There he raised a man who had been for dead four days – and he did it in front of a pretty good-sized crowd, so there were plenty of witnesses. Word of this most remarkable miracle has spread throughout the city. So now the air is especially heavy with suspense. Everyone is convinced that something really big is about to happen.

And nowhere is the mounting tension any higher than among the enemies of Jesus where they gather in their chambers to figure out how to deal with this troublesome prophet from Galilee. The High Priest has stated his opinion in uncertain terms: Jesus must be killed. The only question is how – and still make it look legitimate. Others aren't so sure. They would prefer to take the "wait and see" approach. If Jesus comes for Passover, maybe he'll behave and lay low. Maybe he's just a flash in the pan who has already had his fifteen minutes of fame. Maybe this problem will go away all by itself.

No such luck. Those who were hoping for a quiet resolution to the Jesus crisis were sadly disappointed on Palm Sunday. Not only did Jesus come to town, he did it with all the fanfare of a conquering hero. The people turned out into the streets in droves to declare him to be the Son of David – the promised King. They cried out to him, “Hosanna!” which is a prayer for rescue from oppression. When the authorities tried to get Jesus to calm the crowd and disavow the titles they were heaping on him, he said he couldn’t do that – and even if he did and the people stopped shouting, the very stones of the city would begin to cry out in praise to him. And if that were not provoking enough to them, Jesus then marched to the Temple – the very headquarters of his enemies – and began to cast out the money changers and merchants who operated there—operated there with the complicity of his enemies who received a sizable kickback for letting them do so. It was a move as brilliant as it was audacious. Everyone knew that the Temple market was a corrupt, money making machine for the High Priest and his cronies; but as scandalous as it was, no one dare say anything about it for fear of being cast out – the Old Testament equivalent of excommunication. By making his attack here, Jesus accomplished several things: he seized for himself the moral high ground in the Temple, he raised himself higher still in the eyes of the people, he hurt his enemies in their pocketbooks, and he effectively laid down the gauntlet as if to say, “You are going to have to deal with me one way or another.”

That happened two days before the action in this morning’s text. Now Jesus has returned to the Temple to teach on one of the wide, columned porches. A large crowd has gathered around him. They sit enraptured as he unfolds the truths of God’s Word – and again both the fact that he’s here and he’s so popular is driving his opponents nuts. It infuriates them. So, they send a delegation to challenge him. This is their territory, after all. The people who teach here have to be approved. Only the best trained and most highly qualified rabbis are allowed to carry on here, and it’s widely known that Jesus has no formal theological education. He’s a carpenter, for Pete’s sake. So, his enemies ask him in front of the crowd, “By what right or authority do you teach here and do the things you do?” They think they’ve got him. Since he hasn’t got sanction from the people in charge, he’s either got to say, “I have no authority”, in which case they can say, “Then shut up and get out”; or, if he says, “I have God’s authority”, they’ll run him up on charges of blasphemy – after all, how could anyone be approved by God who is not approved by God’s own High Priest?

But instead of responding directly to their question, Jesus says, “I tell you what, fellas; I’ll answer your question as soon as you answer one of mine. Tell me, John the Baptist, where did he get the authority to do the things he did?” Now the shoe is on the other foot. John too was not sanctioned by the religious authorities – in fact, he was an outspoken critic of the whole Temple establishment; that’s one of the reasons why he did his ministry out in the desert. But Jesus’ enemies know that John is held by the people to be a true prophet of God – and now that he’d been executed by Herod, as a hero and martyr as well. They dare not speak against John by saying that he had no authority from God. But if they say that he was sent by God, they’ll be unable to answer Jesus’ next question: “Then why didn’t you listen to him?” So they take the easy way out by telling Jesus, “We can’t say where John got his authority.” And Jesus replies to them, “Then I guess I won’t tell you where I got mine.”

It’s at this point, turning back to the people gathered around him – while his frustrated opponents are still standing there seething with rage at being outwitted again – that Jesus tells the parable of the rebellious tenants. The story is straightforward. A man lets his vineyard to some tenants. It’s their job to take care of the vines and harvest the fruit. All they have to do is give the owner his share of the proceeds when the time comes. This they refuse to do. Every time the landlord sends his men to collect the rent, the evil tenants beat them up and send them away empty-handed. At last the landlord (who seems to be suffering from a hopelessly foolish case of optimism) decides to send his beloved son. “They’ll respect him” he tells himself. Instead they see an opportunity: “If we kill the heir, when the old man dies we’ll get to keep the vineyard for ourselves.” So that’s what they do. When the son comes, they drag him out of the vineyard and murder him. And then Jesus lays it down: “What do you suppose that landlord will do next? He will come and destroy those wretches and turn his vineyard over to others.”

It happens that many of the parables of Jesus require some explanation to be properly understood. This is not one of them. There is no question about what Jesus means. The vineyard is a common Old Testament metaphor for the country of Israel – the land flowing with milk and honey that God gave to his people. The tenants are clearly the leaders that God has appointed to rule over his people and

bring forth in them the fruits of repentance that he seeks. From time to time he would send forth a prophet to collect the rent, so to speak; and every time he did the religious authorities rejected the Lord's prophets, ridiculed them, roughed them up, and in some cases killed them, and then they led God's people even further astray. The last in this line of prophets was John. He too called the nation to repent and he too was rejected by the religious authorities. And though this time it wasn't their hands that killed him, they all did breathe a sigh of relief when they found out he was dead. Now, Jesus knows – and through the parable he's telling them that he knows – they want him dead too. And through the medium of the parable he's telling them what the consequences of their actions will be should they carry out their plan: they will be destroyed, and God will give their vineyard to others.

And I think it may be hard for us to understand just how shocking a statement that would have been to the people listening to Jesus. These were zealous Jews, remember: people immensely proud of their heritage and their special status as God's chosen people. What Jesus is telling them is that they're about to be judged and that their land and their special status are going to be revoked and given to others—to Gentiles; and that's a thought so horrible and so foreign to their self-understanding that they cry out with what is the strongest negative statement in the Greek language, "No way. Surely not. God would never do that."

"You don't think so?" asks Jesus, "Then what's this that's written in the Psalm: '*The stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner*'?" Though he has changed the metaphor, there's still no question about what he means. He's saying that it's even prophesied in Scripture that he will be rejected by the religious leaders and that he will still nevertheless become the cornerstone of something new – a marvelous new Temple for the Lord (which we know is his Church). And then he takes it one step further by giving them the two options available to them: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but those on whom it falls will be crushed to powder."

I began this message by saying that Jesus didn't leave people with many choices. And here they are: you either fall on Jesus, a broken and contrite sinner trusting in him and his mercy, or the judgment of Jesus will fall on you and destroy you completely. There are no other options. This was true for the people in Jesus' day: people like Peter, and Matthew, and Saul, all of whom had their pride and self-esteem completely obliterated and who were brought to tears of repentance at Jesus' feet; and also people like the Pharisees, scribes, and religious leaders who had no use for Jesus and condemned him to death. They lost their place and their nation – and those who stuck to their resistance to God's Holy Spirit calling them to repentance and faith in Jesus ultimately lost their lives in hell.

The same is true of people today. When encountering Jesus there are only two options: either be broken on him or be crushed under him. There's no middle ground. And this, I think, is what we sometimes lose track of in the church. Especially today when so many popular images of Jesus distort his true image. He's portrayed as a mild-mannered peacenik who leads protests against wars, or a rabid environmentalist who wants to save whales and prevent global warming. In some circles he's the champion of personal freedom who proclaims the gospel of tolerance: judge not lest ye be judged. How dare you call what someone else does a sin. In other places he's the advocate of the poor and oppressed whose mission it is to guilt rich Americans into giving more to help stop world hunger. And in still others on what's perhaps the opposite end of the theological spectrum he's either the easily offended friend who looks forward to hearing people tell him how much they love and honor him, and who feels bad when they don't, or he's the Lord and Master who demands 100% submission and perfect obedience.

But he is none of these things. As he says himself, he is either the Rock on which we must fall and be broken in repentance, or he is the Judge who will condemn us. I mentioned before the service that this Sunday is called "Judica". It's from the traditional introit for the day and the sense of it is that we are standing before God saying to him, "Judge me, O Lord, and declare me righteous." That's an audacious claim; but here's the point: that's what we all must say in God's presence at all times. There's no other way to stand before God for no one unholy or sinful can be there. Now, those who are being broken on Christ, who are continuously confessing their sins and their need for his cross and passion are standing on the Rock. They are righteous in the sight of God and he will judge them so. But those who attempt to stand before God in any other way will be crushed and swept away.

Christ our Lord leaves us only two options. By his grace and the power of his Spirit may he give us to fall on him every day in heartfelt repentance that we may also stand on him and the righteousness he died to achieve for us now and forever. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***