

Broken on the Stone or Crushed Under It

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: today's Gospel, together with the Gospel readings for the next several weeks, come from a section of Matthew in which the Evangelist records the events that took place in the very last week of our Lord's public ministry. Because this is the case, I'd like to back up just a bit to explain how we got to where we are in this morning's story and so put it into context.

Jesus has been traveling around the land of Israel teaching and healing for three years now. At first he was a great sensation. Huge crowds followed him everywhere. But then the religious leaders began to take note of him, and for the most part, they couldn't quite figure him out. His teaching was radical – unlike anything they'd heard before; or rather, unlike the standard ways they had come to understand God's Word and spiritual matters (wrongly understand them, I should add). They were teaching how to be a good and godly by faithfully obeying God's commands. Jesus was teaching a Gospel of grace and forgiveness for those who failed to keep God's commands and who come to him in repentance.

As time went on, this difference in understanding God's Word and his purpose for his people led to a series of confrontations, which gave way to bitter arguing, and finally to open animosity. Jesus' opponents want to kill him. In fact, Jesus left Jerusalem at the beginning of winter precisely because he wanted to delay his arrest and death at the hands of his enemies. But now, in the early spring, he's back; and he arrived in a way that could not be overlooked. On Palm Sunday he rode into town amid much fanfare and rejoicing. His followers were openly proclaiming him to be the Messiah. They believed that he was the long expected Son of David who would reestablish David's throne. It infuriated his opponents. To make matters worse, Jesus marched straight up to the Temple and cleared its sacred courts of the moneychangers and sellers of livestock who had ensconced themselves there. The fact that these merchants had been allowed to do that was a symptom of how corrupt the religious system was. The religious leaders knew very well that it was wrong; but they were getting a share of the sales, so they were looking the other way. That Jesus drove out these sellers of merchandise was like him telling the leaders, "Since you guys aren't being faithful and won't do your jobs, I'll do it for you." The thing of it is, they knew he was right. And that galled them all the more.

Well, the next day Jesus is back. This time he's on the Temple courts teaching. Or, to say it another way, he was doing their jobs for them again. It was more than they could take. The trouble was, he was extremely popular with the people. If they did anything to him, it would make them look bad. So they decide that they'll have to discredit him in the eyes of the people before they can act against him. Their first attempt was the one we heard in last week's Gospel. They came to Jesus and asked him by what authority he was doing these things. It was a good point. The Temple was their responsibility, after all; and even if some things weren't right there, it was their job to take care of it. And not everyone is authorized to teach in the Temple (or in the church). You have to be properly trained and appointed to the task. They were, and to the best of their knowledge, Jesus wasn't. So there you go. If they could get Jesus to admit that he was operating on his own authority, they could tell him to get lost; or better yet, arrest him as an interposer and imposter. If he said his authority was from God, since he wasn't a product of their normal system, they could bring him up on charges of blasphemy.

In response to their question, Jesus said, "I tell you what: I'll answer your question about by what authority I'm doing these things if you answer my question first. You all remember John the Baptist. The Baptism he was doing, was it from God or from man?" It was a clever way to

turn things around because it was another question of authority. Namely, where did John get his? The religious leaders talked it over. They said, "If we say 'from God', he's going to come back at us with 'then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'from man – that is, John was operating on his own', then the crowd will be angry with us because they all hold John to be a bona fide prophet of God." To play it safe, they played dumb and told Jesus, "We don't know." And Jesus said, "Since you won't answer my question, I won't answer yours."

Instead, as the episode continues, he said, "Let me tell you a parable. A man had two sons. He told them both to go work in his vineyard. The first said he would; but then he didn't. The second initially refused to go; but then, later, thought better of it; and went to work. Which son", Jesus asked, "did the will of his father?" They answered, "The second one, of course." And Jesus replied, "That's right. And that's why tax collectors and prostitutes are going into God's Kingdom and you're not. For John the Baptist came with a message from God, calling sinners to repent. You outwardly religious people, the ones who said you would do what God wanted, didn't do it. But the tax collectors and prostitutes, the ones who were outwardly refusing to do what God wanted, heard and repented. And even when you saw the powerful work the Lord was doing in their lives, yet you still refused to repent."

People who want to make of Jesus some kind of namby-pamby peacenik who was always trying to make friends with everybody obviously never read that story, because what he said to them was about as in-your-face and offensive as it could be. You have to visualize all these high flown religious leaders who imagine themselves to be society's best and most righteous people being told that they actually rate much lower in God's eyes than the denizens of Jerusalem's red light district. It would have caused them to turn red with rage and begin to stammer with indignation.

But Jesus doesn't let them speak. It's at this point that he follows through with his second punch: the parable we heard today of the wicked tenants. The story itself is quite simple: a man plants a vineyard, rents it to some tenant farmers, and at harvest time he sends his agents to collect his share of the harvest. But the tenants refuse to pay the rent. They abuse the owner's agents and kill some of them. So the owner sends more agents who only get the same treatment. Finally he says, "I'll send my son; surely they'll respect him." But the tenants see this as their opportunity. "If we kill the heir, the vineyard will be ours!" So that's what they do. They cast the owner's son out of the vineyard and murder him.

A couple things are worth pointing out here. First is the lavish attention the owner spends on the vineyard. Usually it takes time to get a project like this underway. First you clear the ground and plant the vines. It's years before they'll come into commercial production. Only then do you worry about erecting the walls, the watchtower, and the winepress – which gives you time to raise the money you'll need. But no, this guy has all the money he needs to invest right up front, and he spares no expense. This project is very important to him. It's a work of love. The second thing is the owner's monumental patience. Imagine hearing that the tenants refused to pay the agreed rent and even killed some of your agents, and the story being told to you by the one guy who was badly beaten and managed to get away. And you say, "My, that's terrible; but perhaps they didn't understand. I think I'll send some more of my men to collect what's due me." Same thing happens, and still the owner doesn't lose his temper. "Hmm, maybe if I sent my son ..."

What's the parable about? It's about the nation of Israel, which is the Lord's vineyard – the one he planted and nurtured with tender care. He brought his people out of bondage in Egypt and gave them the land flowing with milk and honey; but most of all, he gave them a special covenant relationship with himself. "I will be your God, and you will be my people." And

he placed his holy, forgiving, and merciful presence right in their midst. And what did they do? Why, they turned from him, of course. They worshipped other gods – the false gods of the Canaanites. They engaged in every immoral act you can imagine. And instead of treating each other like fellow members of God’s family, they robbed and cheated and killed each other. They oppressed and took advantage of the poor. They enslaved their own brothers and sisters. In short, they sinned. They sinned a lot; because that’s what sinners do.

And so the Lord sent his prophets to collect the rent: no, not perfect lives and loving behavior, because sinners can’t do that; but instead broken and contrite hearts that hate the sin inside them and come to the Lord trusting in his mercy and grace to forgive. *That’s* the fruit the Lord is looking for because with that he can work to create in his people the good wine of true love. So the prophets came, one after another. Almost to a man they were beaten and killed. And finally the Lord sent his Son, because, he said, “They will respect him.” And the word Jesus uses there for *respect* has a special connotation. The idea is they will be ashamed of themselves on account of him. The Father hopes that the Son will cause them to repent.

The thing to see here is that Jesus has just laid out the whole story that he and his adversaries are playing out even as he speaks. He, the Son, has arrived at the vineyard. He’s here to collect the rent, which is their repentance and trust in him to forgive and to save. And they, like the wicked tenants in the parable are planning to kill him, which indeed they’ll accomplish in only a matter of days. But they haven’t yet connected the dots. They don’t know that Jesus is talking about them. And so Jesus asks them, “What do you suppose the owner of that vineyard is going to do to those guys?” Unwittingly passing judgment on themselves they respond, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to others who will give him the fruits in their seasons.”

They’re right about that. But Jesus hasn’t given up on calling them to repentance and trust in him, so suddenly he shifts the discussion to another passage of Scripture that they probably knew but never quite understood. “Have you never read: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?” Jesus himself is that stone. They, the builders and keepers of God’s house, were about to throw him away. They will have him crucified – in an abandoned rock quarry, no less, for that’s where the site of the crucifixion was. But that rejected stone, Christ crucified, God was going to make the cornerstone of his new Temple – the Christian Church – made up of all the people from every nation, race, and tongue who place their trust in him.

And Jesus warns them: “The one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but the one on whom that stone falls will be completely crushed.” The idea is this: when confronted by Jesus, when the Son comes to collect the fruit of repentance, you are either broken on him, that is, you give up any notion of your own goodness, repent of your sin, and fall on him for forgiveness and strength; or you will be crushed under him, that is, judged and condemned forever. The truth is that everyone is going to fall down to him. Everyone. The only question is will you be *on* the stone, broken hearted over your sin and alive or *under* the stone full of stubborn pride and trust in yourself and dead.

We know what the religious leaders in Jesus’ day chose. They refused to repent and followed through with their plot to destroy him—again, unwittingly doing what the Lord had foretold: the builders rejecting the stone that would become the cornerstone of God’s Temple. Oddly enough, it was their rejection of Jesus that made the miracle of our salvation take place, for by it the Vineyard Owner’s Son was cast out. He was despised and forsaken. And upon the cross he bore the sins of the world – bore *our* sins so that we can come to him now, the Cornerstone of the new, cleansed, holy Temple, falling on him with hearts broken over sins too

numerous to name or count. And when we do he forgives, fills us with his Spirit, and causes us to rise and stand once again – just as he is risen from the dead.

The question is will we do it? You know in our day there is a lot of confusion about what the Christian Church actually is. For some it's social club for people for with a higher sense of morality; a place where they can rub elbows with other good folks – folks like them, who strive to do what's right and to obey God's commands. For others it's a service club for people who want to be doing (or at least want to *be seen* doing) acts of charity for the poor and needy. For others it's mostly a family tradition: the rites, rituals, services, and seasons of the church simply a part of the general routines that order their lives. And for others it's a combination of these things enhanced with an air of spirituality; but mostly it's *our* church. It's where *we're* in charge, where *we're* comfortable, where we do things *our* way, where *we* sing the hymns we like to sing (at least when the pastor picks the right ones for us), where *we* can change whatever things we want to if *we* want to, and where *we don't want* anyone else to rock the boat or upset us in any way.

When we think of the church in any or all of these ways, we're really missing the point because then we're treating it as *our* church and not Christ's. You notice I didn't mention him once in all that description. It's like we threw him out of the Vineyard and put him to death thinking that by doing so we could keep it for ourselves. When we do this, like the religious leaders in Jesus' day, we are in danger of having the Owner come and put us to a miserable end – of being crushed by the Stone. Today, by this parable, Jesus invites us to see the Church as he does: his Vineyard where he seeks the fruit of repentance. It's not our little kingdom for the good, the spiritually healthy, and the morally upright; but it's the Lord's trauma hospital for us poor, miserable, sinners who can't even begin to comprehend how desperately sick we are. It's a place where our wicked lives come under the scrutiny of God's Law, which, like an X-ray reveals all that's wrong and rotten within precisely so that our proud, self-deceived, hardened hearts will be broken on the Stone the builders rejected. That's what dying to sin is all about. And that, in turn, will make us yearn for the miraculous medicine that causes us rise to live with Christ: his powerful Word of forgiveness and his life-giving body and blood.

This is the return on his investment the Lord is seeking in the Vineyard. By his grace, now and always, may he work this fruit in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!