

Love Unknown

In the name of him who has made us his own, dear friends in Christ: A disciple of Jesus once asked him, “Lord, why do you always teach in parables?” His answer was surprising. It wasn’t, as many believe, to make his teachings more memorable. Nor was it to draw his hearers in with something familiar they could relate to. Least of all was it to make his teachings more understandable. The opposite is true: Jesus said that he spoke in parables so that some people, his enemies in particular, would not understand him. Parables both reveal and conceal. To those who believed in him, he said, the gift was given to understand his parables; but to those whose hearts were hardened against him, it was not given. For them his teachings are a closed book. But that is not the case with the two parables we heard Jesus use in today’s Gospel. Though he was speaking primarily to his followers, he knew his opponents were listening. And he meant for them to understand exactly what he was saying.

The action takes place on the temple courts in Jerusalem on Tuesday of Holy Week. Two days before, the followers of Jesus staged a triumphant parade for him. As he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, they marched before and after him waving palm branches singing, “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” For the chief priests and religious leaders it was their worst dream come true. They knew Jesus was popular with the crowds. And here they were openly proclaiming him to be the Messiah and the heir of David’s throne. The city leaders feared it would lead to a rebellion against their Roman conquerors – and that could only end in ruin. The Roman occupation force was much too strong and well armed; while the Jewish nation was weak, unarmed, and divided. An uprising would result in a bloodbath. They feared that everything they knew and loved would be destroyed.

They tried to get Jesus to rein in his followers. They hated him; but they knew him to be an intelligent man. He had to understand just how volatile the situation was. They said, “Jesus, do you hear what these people are saying? Tell them to be quiet!” But instead of cooling things down, Jesus threw more fuel on the fire. He said, “If the crowd were silent, the very stones would cry out.” So saying, Jesus was telling them the crowd’s declarations about him were correct and that he accepted the title of Messiah. There’s also an insult directed at them: even the stones of Jerusalem get it. Apparently you guys aren’t as smart as rocks.

And if that were not enough provocation, shortly after this exchange Jesus drove the money changers and sellers of merchandise out of the temple. You’re familiar with that story. It was a corrupt money making machine that enriched the temple authorities. They were ripping off people who came to worship. Jesus, enraged by it, made a whip of cords and sent the merchants and their wares fleeing in all directions; but he saved his worst condemnation for those who were running the scam. He pointed at the temple authorities and yelled, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but *you* have made it a den of thieves!”

Since then Jesus has been teaching in the temple to large audiences – much to the anger and frustration of his enemies. This is our turf, they think. We’re in charge. He’s got no business here. And yet he’s the one calling the shots acting like he owns the place (ironic, no?). They are extremely jealous of his popularity. None of them have ever drawn hearers like he does. But they dare not lay a hand on him. The crowd would never go for it. It would only

make them look worse in their eyes. What they've got to do, they conclude, is discredit Jesus in front of the people. They've got to make him look bad before his admirers.

Their first attempt at this comes immediately before today's Gospel. They try to pull rank. A group of the guys in charge, some scribes and chief priests, push their way to the front row and they ask Jesus by what authority is he doing all these things. "Who gave you the right to run the merchants out? Who told you that you could teach in the temple?" These were valid questions. In the same way that not just anyone is allowed to preach and teach in our churches, a person had to be authorized and approved to teach in the temple.

Jesus replied (and I'll paraphrase a bit here), "That's a good question; and I'll answer it. But first you have to answer a question of mine. The baptism of John, was it of God or of men?" It was another question of authority. Where did John get his? The temple leaders went into a huddle to discuss it. "If we say John's baptism was of men, the crowd will oppose us because they hold that John was an authentic prophet. But if we say it was of God, he'll ask us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' We lose either way." So they replied to Jesus with a very neutral, "We don't know. We can't answer the question." To which Jesus said, "Okay, then I won't answer your question either."

Jesus then turned from them back to his audience and spoke the words of today's text: a parable about really some bad tenants. They've contracted with an absentee land lord to care for his vineyard. They're supposed to pay rent in the form of a share of the produce. At harvest time, the owner sends a servant to collect his due. But the tenants don't deliver. Instead they beat this representative of the owner and send him away empty-handed. The owner sends another servant. "Maybe they didn't understand he was acting on my orders." Oh, they understood, all right. This servant the tenants also beat and humiliate. Ever the hopeful optimist, the owner sends yet a third servant, who is treated worse than the first two. The tenants cast him out and gravely wound him.

And here's where the story gets really weird. The owner ponders what to do. "I know", he says, "I'll send my beloved son to them. Surely they'll respect him." Now, if you're in the crowd listening to Jesus, you're thinking, "What? Are you insane? They've proven time and again they have no respect for *you*! How can you possibly think they'll respect your son? It's so foolish! Don't do it! "

But they're not telling the story; Jesus is. The owner sends his son to the bad tenants. Sure enough, when they see him coming they conspire against him. "Hey guys, here's the heir of the estate. If we kill him, we'll get to keep the vineyard for ourselves." That's pretty weird reasoning too. It's not the way the law works; but then most criminals aren't very smart. They carry out their wicked plan. They cast the beloved son out of the vineyard and put him to death.

As I said earlier, Jesus intends for this parable to be transparent to his enemies. There's no question about what he means. Jesus is borrowing and embellishing a well known passage from Isaiah in which the Lord speaks of Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular as his vineyard. In Isaiah's telling of it, the owner of the vineyard spares no expense to locate his vineyard in the perfect place. It gets just the right amount of sun and rain. The soil is rich and well-drained. Then he selects the choicest vines and trains them with expert hands. He also builds a wall around the vineyard, sets up a watchtower, and prepares a winepress. He's all set. But no matter what he does, the vines never produce decent grapes. They're all deformed, shriveled, and sour. The fruit of his vineyard is no good.

It's a brief overview of Israel's history: how the Lord chose them as his people, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, defeated their enemies for them, and set them up in the Promised Land – a good land flowing with milk and honey. They were all set. And what was the Lord looking to receive in return? Faithfulness. Faithfulness and the fruit of repentance. But what did he get? Betrayal. Rebellion. Sin. His people turned from him to false gods. They adopted the practices of their pagan neighbors. They mistreated each other, especially the poor and weak. So, what happens? In Isaiah's telling, the owner of the vineyard gives up on it. He decides to tear down the wall that protects the vineyard so the wild animals can have at it. He lets the weeds and brambles overgrow it. It's a picture of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity.

But Jesus tweaks the story in his telling of it. In his version, there *is* some fruit there. And the Lord ever hopefully and patiently keeps sending agents to collect his share of it. These are the prophets who throughout Israel's history the Lord sent to call the people to repent of their sins and return to him. They were always opposed – most especially by the political and religious leaders. The Lord's prophets were ridiculed, humiliated, imprisoned, beaten, and sometimes killed at the hands of his own people. Everyone in Jerusalem knew of their sorry track record for receiving the Lord's agents.

So what does the Lord decide to do? He sends his beloved Son. Is that a reasonable thing to do? No. Not remotely. But then *love* isn't reasonable. Indeed, love is its own reason. This is why the Father sends his Son. This is why the Son gladly agrees to go. Do they know what's going to happen? In the parable, the owner is foolishly hopeful. In reality, the Father and Son both know what's going to happen: the beloved Son will be cast out and killed in the most horrific way: the slow agony of crucifixion. It's unthinkable that anyone would volunteer to suffer such a death – especially on behalf of dirty, rotten sinners who deserve to be treated far worse. Yes: it's unthinkable to us, which is why it takes a love unknown to us. We are not capable of such love. But God the Father and God the Son are. God is love.

By means of this parable Jesus is telling his adversaries – the bad tenants – “I know where this is headed. You are going to cast me out and kill me. You think that by so doing, you'll get to keep your place and your nation. By killing me you think that you're saving yourselves. You're wrong. The vineyard will be taken from you and given to someone who will give to the owner the fruit he's after. In the end, it's you who will be destroyed.”

They are taken aback. “Surely not!” they exclaim. “No? Then what is this that is written: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone?’” It's a sharp turn to another short parable. Jesus cites a passage from Psalm 118 – which just happens to be the Psalm from which his followers were quoting when he rode into the city on Palm Sunday, so it's fresh in everyone's mind. And what Jesus is doing is pointing from the Scripture to his own resurrection. He's saying to his adversaries that I'm the stone that you the builders are rejecting. But I'll be back. And when I do, I'm going to be the most important stone in the building – the one everything else lines up and depends on. He means the Christian Church, of course. His death and resurrection are what it's all about.

He continues: “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” There are only two options. Everyone has to deal with Jesus one way or the other. You can either be broken on him, that is, broken and contrite for your sin, and trust in him and his work of atonement for salvation; or be crushed under him when he comes in judgment and casts unbelievers into hell.

The scribes and chief priests got the message loud and clear. It so infuriated them that they wanted to grab him then and there; but they feared the crowd. Just a few days later, though, they saw their opportunity and took it, just as Jesus had predicted. The vineyard owner's beloved Son was cast out and killed—not coincidentally, killed in an abandoned rock quarry called Golgotha. The stone from it was judged to be of inferior quality, not suitable for building. It was rejected stone, like the stone Jesus himself.

They killed him there thinking that by doing so they were saving themselves and their nation. What they didn't know was that by killing him they were playing a part in his mission to save the world. And everything else happened as Jesus said it would. He came back as the cornerstone of the new temple, the Holy Christian Church, founded upon God's wondrous and unknown love displayed in the sacrifice of his Son for a world of sinners. After that, the temple authorities were no longer in charge of the Lord's vineyard. It was given to others; namely to the twelve apostles and their successors, whose task it is to call all people to produce the fruit of repentance, to be broken on account of their sin *on* the Stone for if they don't, they will surely be crushed under it.

Everyone must deal with Jesus. There are only two options. If you think you can save yourself, you will experience his wrath and judgment. You will be condemned. But if you know that you cannot save yourself, that your many sins prevent it, you can fall broken on him knowing that he suffered the judgment for you. All who do experience God's love unknown. That includes even those adversaries of Jesus who heard him speak these parables and who were instrumental in his death. To be sure, Jesus told them this in advance so that later they would remember and understand that the way to life was through repentance and faith in him. No one is excluded from God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus – such is his love unknown. Therefore by his Word and Spirit may the Lord keep us at all times both repentant and faithful. And through us and our agency for him may he reach out into the world that many more may come to know God's love unknown. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!