

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 67”**  
*Matthew 21:33-46*

Jesus must have been an infuriating person to have a conversation with. He would never give a straight answer. In fact, he rarely seems to say anything direct at all, unless he is criticising someone else. He very often sounds like a politician being interviewed by John Humphrys on the *Today* programme. Much of his teaching is in parables and his replies to the questions of others usually seem evasive and often, initially, unrelated to the actual questions. In many ways he seems to be the King of Spin!

This story is still part of the reply he gave to the leaders of the people when they asked him what his authority was for marching into the Temple and demolishing the stalls of the traders who had been given permission to ply their trade in the outer courtyards. The questions of the elders and chief priests were met with more questions from Jesus and, ultimately, a refusal to answer them at all. But Jesus tells three stories to ram home his point that things in the Kingdom of God are going to be a bit different from what they were expecting. (The chapter division, as is often the case, masks the fact that the conversation runs on into chapter 22 and these three parables are told by way of response to the question of the officials.)

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the story of the two sons and noted the confusion that often exists in people's minds between enthusiasm and commitment. Those who are serious about following Jesus the Kingly Messiah are going to be in it for the long haul and need to be prepared for the commitment that Jesus asks of them. It's not all about outward show and lots of fine words. It is, as we've been saying all through the journey through Matthew's Gospel, about our attitudes and the set of our heart. Get that right and the behaviour will follow on.

This, the second of the three parables, is about tenant farmers or sharecroppers who respond to the absentee landlord's claim on his income with violence and murder, and is one of the most complex and one of the bleakest parables that Jesus tells. It is set in a context that would have been very familiar to his listeners and has a kind of allegorical feel to it, in that the various characters in the story are all representative of people whom his listeners would have been able to identify.

Jesus begins on ground which would be familiar to his audience – the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. Once again we see Matthew gently reminding his congregation, full of newly converted Jewish people, that it's OK to follow Jesus because he is the culmination of all they've read in their Scriptures, the person they've actually been waiting for all along. The first couple of sentences are lifted right out of *Isaiah 5*, where God refers to his beloved people Israel as a vineyard.

*“My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.”*

But then Jesus goes on to subvert the story completely in the eyes of the Jewish leaders. He takes the images of the vineyard and superimposes on them the conditions that would apply to many of his peasant listeners. At the time Jesus was around, there would have been many situations like this. Much of the land that had been held by the Jewish people for centuries had been confiscated by the occupying power – in this case, Rome – or sold off by peasants eager to get a bit of cash.

Many of the vineyards – and olive groves and other arable lands – were now in the possession of Roman war veterans, civil servants and other foreigners who saw no need to live in the poverty-stricken corner of the Empire that was Palestine. So as they spent their time up near the Black Sea or in the hills of Tuscany or on the Greek islands or at the hub of the Empire in Rome, they would engage Palestinian peasants to tend the vines and work the fields, with the reward of a small percentage of the crop for themselves. It was virtually slave labour and the owners would send their agents a couple of times a year to get their 80%, or whatever, and ensure that the tenant farmers were working as hard as they were supposed to. In the event that the landlord died and left no heir, the tenants could petition for ownership of the land once again. As you can imagine, there was a great deal of resentment amongst the people of Israel at these arrangements and there was always the threat of rebellion bubbling along under the surface, so the landlords' agents would try to ensure that when they visited they were not alone and that they had a group of armed "mindes" with them.

It's a parable that has a good deal of resonance today with situations around the world in which poor farmers have been forced to surrender their land and their livelihoods to far more powerful interests. Whether it's farmers in Africa who have found their land appropriated by multinational corporations, or Andean growers who have been forced into virtual slavery by drug barons, or poor Palestinian peasants who have lost their land to American-backed Jewish settlers, the sense of humiliation and the ever-present threat of violence are as real today as they were in Jesus' day. I mention that in order to give you some sense of what the feeling amongst the poorer of Jesus' listeners might have been. The point Jesus is making is quite a different one, and in so doing he exposes the murderous intentions of the religious and political leaders of the Jewish people.

As I've said, Jesus begins in *Isaiah 5*. Here is God, the great farmer, who sets out his vineyard, Israel. He puts the priests and other leaders in charge and expects to see some fruit. (There's a possible link here maybe, in Matthew's thinking, between this story and the incident with the fig tree which happened a couple of days before this episode). His agents, the prophets, are sent one by one to try and encourage the fruit – the attitudes and actions which will show the people to be keeping to God's values of justice and righteousness. But they are rejected and despatched with violence and humiliation. And if you think

back to the stories of the prophets in the Old Testament, you'll recall the treatment which they received at the hands of their own Jewish people, particularly at the hands of kings, priests and false prophets.

Eventually, the time comes for God to make the supreme gesture and send his son and heir to sort out the tenants. In the story, the tenants clearly assume that the landlord is dead (why else would his son come) and they think that by killing the son they will have the vineyard for themselves. Jesus has come into Israel as the only Son of the Father and expects respect. Alas, despite the authority with which Jesus comes, they kill him too and Jesus' words here clearly point once again to his own death, as well as pointing to the authority which does lie behind his words and actions. But God does not now stand by and allow the people to get away with this. He gets rid of the tenants, the leaders of the people, and throws the benefits of the vineyard open to everyone – once again, the beneficiaries of the Jewish people's refusal to acknowledge Jesus are the Gentiles. The Jews have had first crack and rejected God's grace, so he extends that offer to the whole world.

The ending is not unexpected: Jesus' rhetorical question in v40, shows that to be the case. But what is perhaps unexpected here is the great patience that the landlord shows before the final showdown. Despite the treatment that the first agent receives, the landlord sends another – and another and another. They are beaten, killed, humiliated, but still the landlord keeps sending them, hoping that the tenants will respond eventually. The sending of his own son is a calculated risk which ends up going wrong and in the end there is no alternative but to dispense the ultimate judgement.

Compare that, then, with the story of the Jewish people which is a story of patience and love far beyond anything that a human might have demonstrated. The whole story of the Old Testament is of God's people rebelling and being forgiven and welcomed back into God's love and then rebelling again – and again and again. In the end, *“God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son”* – Jesus came. But the Jewish leaders in particular rejected him and the authority from God with which he came. And as Jesus tells the story, so the penny drops in their minds: *“When the chief priests and Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them”* (v45). But they are powerless to act at this time because of Jesus' popularity with the crowd. Within a couple of days, though, they will have set in train the events which lead to the fulfilment of this prophetic parable.

Now we, of course, are the beneficiaries of this. The “vineyard” is now open to all, Jews and Gentiles – and for that we must be grateful. But an even greater sense of gratitude should fill us when we reflect on what this parable tells us about our God. If you read this story quickly and superficially, God can seem to be vengeful and vindictive. He comes and kills the tenants and gives away their land. But in the world in

which Jesus lived, the landlord might well have done that much earlier in the story. We read here of a God who is enormously patient, who wants to give people a chance.

God sends three servants who are specifically mentioned (v35), and then “*sent others*”. They are all abused, some even killed, but God keeps trying. For the Jewish leaders, the point Jesus was making was a simple one about their treatment of him and their refusal to accept his authority. For us, the point is that we are loved by a God of tremendous patience. He gives us opportunity after opportunity to respond. His grace is so deep and wide.

We’ve probably all experienced something of that grace in our own lives as God has forgiven us time and time again for our rebellion and disobedience. Sometimes we act carelessly and thoughtlessly and end up doing things which on reflection we know are against God’s will for us. At other times we deliberately go against God’s will, knowing that we are disobeying him. But every time, as we reflect on what we have done and as we acknowledge before God our weaknesses and our inability to resist certain temptations, he forgives us and offers us another chance.

There may be some of you here this morning, though, who have never really reached out to God and asked for his help, who have never committed yourself to him at all. You’ve had opportunity after opportunity. You have heard the story of Jesus and you know that need to respond, but you haven’t. You love your own way of doing things too much. Friends have talked to you about Jesus. You’ve sat here and listened and sung and joined in – but deep down you are in a state of rebellion against him. You want to go your own way for a bit longer yet. God has shown remarkable patience with you. You are still getting the opportunity to respond. His grace continues to be extended to you. But there will come a time – as happened in the story here – when that patience does run out. And you don’t know when that might be. When it does run out, it will be too late to do anything about it, so you need to think very hard about it now.

The Kingdom of God is growing. Fruit is being borne. But if you want to exclude yourself from it, that’s your choice and, although God may well keep on giving you another chance to respond, eventually you will find God lets you have your way and you lose out on the eternal benefits of being part of his Kingdom. Time is inexorably running out. Don’t leave it too late.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why do you think Jesus seems so evasive in his replies to questions and in his teaching? Would you prefer him to be more direct? Why/why not?
2. Look at the stories of some of the prophets in the Old Testament. How were they treated? Why?
3. How is *v42* related to what Jesus is saying here?
4. Think of some other examples of God's patience in the stories of the Bible. Have you experienced his patience in any particular way?
5. Can we ever be sure when God's patience will run out?
6. What one thing sticks in your mind about this story?