PARABLES

The Parable of the Noble Vineyard Owner and his Son – Luke 20:9-18

[See also Mark 12:1-11 and Matthew 21 23-27]

Introduction

- This is sometimes called the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. This assumes the tenants are the main players in the story. In its cultural context the owner of the vineyard is clearly the hero of the story.
- The owner demonstrates *'makrothymia'*! This is a very rich word used when a person is in a position of power and in a position to wreak vengeance on his enemies but chooses not to do so. It literally means, 'He puts his anger far away'. In English we have no single word for this virtue. In Greek they have *'makrothymia'* and in Arabic *'halim'*.
- The vineyard owner opts for total vulnerability in the face of violence.
- Possible words in English include: patience, longsuffering, risk-taking, compassion and self-emptying. All these could be used to describe the vineyard owner.
- This is the word that would describe David's virtue when he stood over the sleeping body of King Saul. Against the advice of his soldiers, David stays his hand and spares the king's life even though Saul was seeking to kill David (1 Sam. 26). David puts his anger far away. This is what the vineyard owner does in this parable.

The Setting

In both Luke and Mark the parable is told in the context of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple. The cleansing of the Temple was a very serious matter for the Temple authorities.

Jesus clearly occupied the entire Temple area for a few hours. Mark writes, "***He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple"*** (11:16). Evidently the public were using the Temple area as a public thoroughfare. Jesus and His followers blocked this unauthorised by-pass, overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of the merchants driving out **both** buyers and sellers.

This meant that for that day they had to control the entire 35-acre complex! He shut down the afternoon sacrifice. At the end of the day Jesus and His followers voluntarily withdrew. They had made their public statement. The new Messianic King had claimed His own and had signalled that the Temple was obsolete and its destruction near. [See **Jesus and the Victory of God** by N.T. Wright.]

Middle Easterners have always taken their sacred rites very seriously. It isn't surprising that as a result of Jesus' actions, ***"The chief priest and the scribes and principle men of the people sought to destroy Him."*** (Lk. 19:47) Jesus' actions were extremely provocative! From that time on He was only safe from arrest when protected by His extraordinary popularity. A planned reaction by the Temple authorities was inevitable.

The first public response from the Temple leaders is recorded in all 3 Synoptic Gospels. They sent a delegation composed of ***"chief priests and scribes and elders"*** (Lk. 20:1) to question Jesus as He was teaching in the Temple. The Sanhedrin was composed of these 3 types of people – priests, scribes and elders. The priests were spiritual rulers, the scribes were moral rulers and the elders were civil leaders. This was an official delegation. The presence of all three groups shows the seriousness of their concerns. They wanted to know by what **authority** Jesus presumed to ***"do these things"***.

In fact there were two questions:

1. By what authority do you do these things?
2. Who gave you this authority?

Jesus countered with a second question that His challengers refused to answer. The little debate closed with the answer of Jesus, ***"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things"*** (Lk. 20:8). He **won't answer** their question as to the source of his authority. But He will tell them a story that answers their question indirectly! Note that Jesus told the parable not only to the delegation, but also to all the people gathered there.

The Structure of the Parable

a) The vineyard is rented.

b) The servants are sent and the tenants treat them badly and send them away.

c) The owner responds by sending his son – alone and unarmed.

d) The son is seen and the tenants murder him.

e) The vineyard is rented to others.

In an English story the climax is usually at the end. Often in Jesus' parables the climax is in the middle! The story is parabolic – i.e. (e) mirrors (a). So (c) is in the centre of the drama. The decision made by the owner is **huge** and that decision is the climax of the story.

Note that the treatment of those sent gets harsher. The first servant got a beating, the second was beaten and treated shamefully and the third was beaten, wounded and then 'cast out'.

The Meaning of the Story

"A man planted a vineyard and let it out to vinedressers and went into another country for a long time."

The Old Testament has few parables, but the 'Song of the Vineyard' in Isaiah 6:1-6 is one of them. In this song God plants a vineyard and spares no effort to see that it produces good grapes. But sadly it produces wild grapes. The vineyard owner decides the vineyard is a failure and opts to tear it down. The symbols of the story are identified in Isaiah and the vineyard is judged harshly. In the Bible the figure of the vine and vineyard occurs often as a symbol of the Jewish people. (Ps. 80:15; Ezek. 28:26; Jer. 12:10; Hosea 2:12, 15)

Symbol	**Isaiah's song**	**Jesus' story**
Owner	The Lord of Hosts	God
Vineyard	The House of Israel	Israel
Vines	The men of Judah	–
Benefits anticipated from:	The vineyard	The renters
Expectations consist of:	Good grapes (justice and righteousness)	Part of the crop (??)
Yield	Wild grapes (bloodshed and cries of pain)	Beatings, insults and bloodshed (owner gets nothing)
Result	Vineyard destroyed	The renters replaced

Isaiah's parable contains both the story and extra information for its interpretation. Jesus told the story and there are keys to its meaning. At the time of Herod and his family the wealthy lived in cities usually some distance from their estates. The social setting was familiar to Jesus' hearers.

The 'Song of the Vineyard' and the 'Parable' contain similar symbols but there are some important differences. Jesus is re-telling and giving new shape to the 'Song' in Isaiah.

Mark's account (12:1-11) gives a few extra details that re-enforce the connections between the 'Song' and the 'Parable'.

Some Differences

In the parable the owner and the builder of the vineyard live quite a distance from the vineyard. In the Song the owner is tending the vines himself. This change allows Jesus to introduce the renters who are crucial in the story for they refuse to pay the rent.

There are 3 separate scenes in the story with a progression:

- 1st servant was sent and was beaten and sent away
- 2nd servant was sent and was beaten and shamed and sent away
- 3rd servant was sent and experienced considerable physical violence. He wasn't sent away but was "cast out".

In the Middle East personal honour is held in extremely high esteem. So how much violence and insult against his servants will the owner of the vineyard tolerate? What response is expected? What will the owner choose to do?

c) provides an answer:

> ***"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. It may be they will feel shame before him'."***

The owner has the right to contact the authorities who, at his request, will send a heavily armed company of trained men to storm the vineyard, arrest the violent men who have mistreated his servants and bring them to justice.

The abusing of his servants is an insult to his servants and he is expected – indeed he is honour-bound – to deal with the matter in order to restore his own honour and the honour of his household. No anger is mentioned, but it is assumed. The question is: What will he do with his anger generated by the injustice he and his servants have suffered?

In rabbinic tradition there is a story (midrash) from Exodus and Moses dealing with Pharaoh and God's response. It goes like this:

"For whose sake did God reveal Himself in Egypt? For the sake of Moses. Rabbi Nissim said this by a parable of a priest who had an orchard of figs in which there was a section that was unclean. When he wished to eat some of the figs, he told one of his men to go and say to the renter, 'The owner of the orchard bids you to bring him two figs'. He went and told him. Whereupon the tenant replied, 'Who is the owner of the orchard? Go back to your work.' Then the priest said, 'I will go myself to the orchard.' His men said, "Will you go to an unclean place?' He replied, 'Even if there be a hundred forms of uncleanness, I will go so that my messenger may not be put to shame.' "

So when Israel was in Egypt, God said to Moses, ***"Come now, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh"***. (Ex. 3:10) So he went and was asked, ***"Who is the Lord that I should hearken to His voice? …… I know not the Lord. Get you to your burdens."*** Then God said, ***"I will myself go to Egypt …… ."*** Whereupon his angel said, ***"Will you go to an unclean place?"***
The reply was, ***"Yes, so that my messenger Moses may not be put to shame"***.

Rabbi Nissim studied at the famous public school of Sura in Baghdad and returned to follow his father in the rabbinate of Kairwan, Tunisia, where he died in 1040.

Now the reader of this story knows that when God says, "I will Myself go to Egypt", the purpose of His going was to carry out the 10th plague that killed all the firstborn in Egypt. So Rabbi Nissim reflects on the typical reaction of the expectation of the owner of the vineyard when his servants are not merely put to shame by being dismissed in an offhand way, but are insulted, beaten, wounded and thrown out three times in a row!

So according to Rabbi Nissim, if God is willing to go to Egypt **in person** and inflict the death of the firstborn on the Egyptians in response to a verbal slight received by his servant Moses, what sort of violent acts will the vineyard owner (in the parable of Jesus) do when three of his servants are insulted, beaten and injured? In Isaiah's parable God destroys the entire vineyard and says, ***"I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it"***. (Is. 5:6) The vineyard is totally annihilated. For the Egyptians, the 10th plague was devastating. How are we to understand the decision made by the owner in the story Jesus told?

Our Muslim friends expect the owner of the vineyard to behave with extreme violence – the same as Rabbi Nissim – for this is the only way that honour can be restored.

In the parable of the Great Banquet, (Lk. 14:15-24) a wealthy man gives a great banquet and invites many. At the time of the banquet, he sends his servants to the homes of the guests to tell them, ***'Come, for all is ready'***. One after another they refuse to attend, providing fabricated, paper-thin excuses that are an insult to the host. After three such public insults to the host, the servant can't endure any more. He returns to his master who, on hearing the refusals, gets angry. At this point the host faces the same problem as the owner of the vineyard. **What will he do with his anger that is certainly justified?** To our utter amazement, he reprocesses is his anger into **grace**. He sends the servant to invite outcasts to his banquet!

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard must answer the same question: What is to be done with anger generated by injustice? Will he allow his enemies to dictate the nature of his response? He is in a position of power. Retaliation is possible and is expected. But is further violence the only answer? Can the vineyard owner follow the same costly path that the host in the Great Banquet chose when he turned his anger into a gracious invitation to outcasts within the community and then outcasts from anywhere?

Note the painful pause where the master says, "What can I do?" (The owner experiences anger, frustration, pain, anguish, rejection, desire for retributive justice and finally a very costly peace out of which he chooses to act.)

To everyone's total surprise he says, ***"I will send my beloved son"***. So the son is sent to the vineyard alone and unarmed! Esau took 400 armed men with him to meet Jacob. (Gen. 33:1) But with the memories of the humiliation and suffering of his returning servants fresh in his mind, the owner sends his own beloved son. That son journeys with no escort to meet the vicious men who were tensely awaiting the owner's response to their last outrage. Is the sending of the son a case of outrageous stupidity by the owner?

Hussein bin Talal was King of Jordan. Many unforgettable stories are passed around the Arab World about this remarkable king. Some Jordanian believers think he was a believer for he did much to protect Christians and encourage the distribution and reading of the Bible. One very well-authenticated story is as follows:

One night in the early 80s, King Hussein was informed by his security police that a group of about 75 Jordanian army officers were, at that very moment, meeting in a nearby barracks, plotting a military overthrow of the Kingdom. The security officers requested permission to surround the barracks and arrest all the plotters. After a long and sombre pause, the king refused and said, 'Bring me a small helicopter'. A small helicopter was brought. The king climbed in with the pilot and himself flew to the barracks and landed on the flat roof. The king told the pilot, 'If you hear gunshots, fly away at once without me'. Unarmed, the king then walked down two flights of stairs and suddenly appeared in the room where the plotters were meeting. He quietly said to them, "Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are meeting here tonight to finalise your plans to overthrow the government, take over the country and install a military dictator. If you do this, the army will break apart and the country will be plunged into civil war. Tens of thousands of innocent people will die. There is no need for this. Here I am! Kill me and proceed. That way, only one man will die!

After a moment of stunned silence, the rebel army officers rushed forward as one to kiss the king's hands and feet and pledge loyalty to him for life!

King Hussein opted for total **vulnerability**. He acted with *'makrothymia'* – *'halim'* and by so doing he fanned into flame the dying embers of the rebels' sense of honour.

In this parable Jesus is telling an autobiographical story about Himself. In Aramaic/Arabic, the owner of the vineyard says literally: "I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will feel shame in his presence."

Like the army officers plotting to overthrow King Hussein, the hope of the owner is that the violent renters will sense the indescribable nobility of the owner who sends his beloved son alone and unarmed into the vineyard in response to the violent acts they had committed against the owner's servants. The story implies that if the renters accept the authority of the son and pay the rent, amnesty will apply. That was true in the case of King Hussein's officers.

The ESV of the Bible reads, ***"It may be they will respect him"***. But the issue is deeper and more profound than the word 'respect'. The owner was acting out of unspeakable nobility and he profoundly hopes his choice of total vulnerability will awaken a long-forgotten sense of honour in the hearts of these violent men. He is willing to take the risk! His servants had already been beaten and wounded; yet he will risk an even greater loss. Retaliation is not the only way. The costly path of total vulnerability has the power to be life-renewing (cf. King Hussein). The violent option would only trigger further violence. King Hussein risked death and achieved restitution. In a different way, at far greater cost and on a different level, so did the Lord Jesus! **The climax of the parable is that with the total vulnerability there is also a demand of the offering of costly self-emptying love.** The owner's unbelievable decision is truly earthshaking! Ponder this for a long while!

How would the hearer understand the phrase, 'My beloved son'? In Ps. 2:7 God tells the newly enthroned king of Israel, ***"You are my son. Today I have begotten you"***. The Messiah was to be such a king. A few days before Jesus told this parable, He had publicly affirmed that He was the Messiah in the dramatic act of His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. The Father spoke at His baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration regarding 'His Beloved Son' (a paraphrase of the first Servant's Song in Isaiah 42:1) Again, these experts in the Scripture would have understood that Jesus was speaking of Himself as the Messiah.

So the owner's answer to the question, 'What shall I do?' was the costly action of sending his son and so sending the ball into the court of his tenants. On seeing the son, they have to ask the same question of themselves. 'What shall we do now?'

"But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir, let us kill him <u>so the inheritance will be ours'</u>. And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." (v. 14)

They took him out of the vineyard and killed him. If they had killed him within the vineyard, the ground would have been defiled and their grapes would be worthless. (Num. 35:33) The really important phrase is, ***"The inheritance will be ours"***!

There is a ruling in the Mishnah regarding 'squatters rights' that says:

"Title by squatting to houses, cisterns, trenches, vaults, dovecotes, bathhouses, olive presses, irrigated fields, slaves and anything else that brings constant gain is secured by occupation during three completed years."

This sheds light on the mentality of the renters. If they can maintain physical possession for three years, they can secure ownership of the land.

Now we come to a very important part of the parable. What does "the inheritance" mean to the hearers? It could mean:

- The land of Palestine
- The people – the nation of Israel
- The spiritual inheritance of Israel

The parable itself only hints at the answer. The answer is partly discovered by identifying "the others" to whom the vineyard owner gave the vineyard. (v. 16) So the question is, 'What is given to whom"?

In Isaiah's parable the vineyard is the "men of Israel". The vineyard is torn down – implying the destruction of the nation. But in the parable Jesus told, it is the renters/tenants who are criticised, not the vineyard. Clearly the renters were trying to obtain ownership.

Jesus is clarifying the conflict between Himself and the Temple leadership. He is expressing His deep criticism of them. This they understood well. We read in v. 19, ***"The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on Him at that very hour; for they perceived that He had told this parable against them …."*** The crowds listening knew that he wasn't criticising them or the people of Israel as a whole. The parable was directed to "The scribes and chief priests".

So who are "the others"?

- Some suggest the whole Gentile church/the Christian community in the world
- But probably "the others" is a **new leadership** that God will raise that accepts the Messiahship of Jesus.

Note: Jesus isn't interested in starting a new 'settler movement' and controlling the land. Jesus isn't interested in becoming a new Herod ruling the nation. But Jesus is very interested in the heritage of Israel, for **the inheritance is the Kingdom of God**. When Jesus – in His earthly loneliness – describes Himself as Son and Heir, the concept of the Kingdom and of the inheritance is freed from earthly limitations. It is both a spiritual and a material cosmos. The Kingdom/inheritance is the new cosmos in which God reigns alone and supreme.

My personal material inheritance from my parents was rather small, but my spiritual heritage was and is enormous. Israel's high priestly establishment controlled a religious institution with a set of buildings. In the first century, the house of Annas with his 5 sons (each of whom became a high priest in turn) and Caiaphas (his son-in-law) controlled the high priestly office for decades. They were probably confident that their 'dynasty' would continue indefinitely. But Jesus, by His brief occupation of the Temple area, had challenged that assumption. They had confidence that if only they could be rid of Jesus, the control of this inheritance would not be challenged again.

But Jesus saw Himself as having the full right to define what it meant to be faithful to the God of Abraham, Moses and the prophets and this inheritance is what **really** mattered. Worship in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim or in Rome or any other place was not critical. But worship ***"in spirit and truth"*** was of ultimate significance. (Jn. 4:21-23)

The idea that "the inheritance" was far more than the land or the nation was very well understood both before Jesus and after Him. In the apocryphal book of Enoch (40:9-10) it speaks of, "the hope of those who would inherit eternal life". (1st century B.C.) So in Luke 10:25 a lawyer asked Jesus, ***"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"*** In Luke 18:18 a ruler asks the same question. Later on in the first century A.D. Rabbi Eliezer was asked by his disciples how "to take possession of the life of the future world". So for about one century before birth of Jesus until at least one century after, the idea of inheritance was linked to the concept of eternal life.

King Hussein was prepared to die. The beloved son in the parable knew what had happened to the servants and how the confrontation might end. Luke records three occasions when Jesus predicted His own death. Well, the beloved son was killed. What would the owner do now? ***"He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others."*** When the priests and scribes heard, they were truly and deeply shocked and said, "***God forbid!"*** (v. 16)

So often in the Old Testament the prophets spoke of the destruction of the nation. In Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard it spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem. But the parable Jesus told was much milder. The vineyard wasn't threatened at all the tenants were the problem – i.e. the

Temple leadership and not the nation. The nation deserved better shepherds. So it was little wonder that the parable directed at the Temple leadership caused them to:

1. be very shocked
2. cry out and say, "God forbid"
3. plan to kill Jesus

Jesus replies with another parable – again borrowed from the Old Testament – Ps. 118:19-28. It is a parable about a stone. The same passage is also about the Triumphal Entry by the Messiah into Jerusalem that the Temple leadership and the people had just witnessed. In Luke's account (19:40) Jesus tells the Pharisees, ***"I tell you if these*** *(disciples)* ***were silent, the very stones would cry out".***

What "stones"? We ask. Was Jesus referring to the great stones of the Temple Mount? Or perhaps to the "stone" of Psalm 118 that was rejected and then became the chief cornerstone?

There is a double play on words:

- In Hebrew a parable is *'masal'*. The dialogue that follows is called a *'nimsal'*.
- In Hebrew a son is *'ben'*. A stone is *'eben'*.

So the beloved son (*ben*) of the vineyard has become the rejected **stone** *(eben)*.

To this is added a quote from Isaiah 8:14, ***"And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel … and many shall stumble on it."*** In the Isaiah passage it is God who is speaking. Jesus takes this Biblical text and applies it to Himself.

In this parable Jesus offers **grace** and **judgement** – recurring themes in His teaching.

- In the parable of the **Great Banquet** grace is extended to the unworthy and those who refused to come to the banquet brought judgement on themselves for they were shut out. (Luke 14:24)
- In the parable of the **Talents** grace was extended to all the servants – even to the one who was unfaithful. Yet those who flatly refused the master were confronted with what they deserved. (Luke 19:27)
- In the parable of the **Fig Tree** the unfruitful tree was the recipient of extraordinary grace. But the option of judgement remained. (Luke 13:9)

A Summary of the major themes in the Parable of the Noble Vineyard Owner and his Son

1. **The connection of Incarnation and Atonement**
   Both themes meet in this parable. God sent His Only Beloved Son alone into "the vineyard" where His servants had been insulted, injured and thrown out (in Mark's version killed). The parable tells of God willingness to give Himself, through His Son, in total vulnerability in order to win His people back to Himself. The Incarnation is affirmed and the Cross is foreseen. The short-term result of the offer of love is the death of the Son. We need to reflect on the nature of the long-term effects of this self-emptying act of the owner and His Beloved Son.
2. **The deity of the Lord Jesus**
   Jesus is in the line of the prophets, but He is also the Beloved Son. The prophetic tradition came to its climax in Him. He is the agent to whom the ultimate appeal of costly love is made. He is sent into the world to call all people – particularly His opponents – to be reconciled to His Father. Language that describes God in the Old Testament is quoted and applied to Jesus.
3. **The reprocessing of anger into grace**
   The owner of the vineyard doesn't respond to the renters by force or violence. Rather he chooses incarnation with its total vulnerability. To do this, he must reprocess his

justified anger into a costly demonstration of unexpected love and grace. That incarnation implies forgiveness for those who accept his offer of love.

We, the Gentile church, have no right to boast for we are debtors to God for mercies without count. We have not been dealt with according to our sins! Thank God, ***"He delights in mercy"***. (Micah 7:18)

4. **Leadership of the vineyard of God**
   The tenants were only renting the vineyard, but their intention was to claim 'squatters rights'. They imagined that if they controlled the vineyard long enough and if they could 'control facts on the ground' by killing the son, then the vineyard would become theirs. They were wrong. We believers in Jesus – in every place and in all ages – need to be reminded that we do not own "the inheritance" and we cannot keep its fruits for our own exclusive use. If we attempt to do so, we have joined "the tenants". The fruits of the vineyard must be offered to its owner – God. The tenants are challenged to offer obedience to the Beloved Son.

   The church in history has had many who are similar to the Temple leadership. They have allowed false doctrines and wicked practices to flourish. It is a very sad fact that hardness, unbelief, superstition and self-righteousness have flourished. ***"The carnal mind is enmity with God."***

5. **The nature of the fruits that are due to God from the vineyard**
   In Isaiah 5:7 these fruits are identified as ***"justice and righteousness"***. In this parable Jesus implies the same identification, but the details are left to the hearers.

6. **The nature of the inheritance**
   The violent tenants murder the son hoping to gain "the inheritance". Jesus is not interested in controlling land or in the "Temple made with hands". All through His ministry He is very interested in the theological and ethical heritage of Abraham, Moses and all the prophets. Who has a right to claim that heritage and distil meaning from it for the present and future? Jesus claims that right and He is willing to die, exercising and fulfilling that right.

7. **The depth of sin**
   The depth of sin knows no shame. The tenants respond to the owner's costly love by murdering his son. This is a faithful picture of the Jewish people and of people in general.

   The Temple leaders felt that **only they** had the right to decide what should or should not happen in the Temple. It is so easy for us to challenge the right of Jesus to final authority. We all have a tendency to say, "I know best". This attitude is not a result of education or intellect or common sense or intuition, but comes from pride in the human heart. Jesus must always have the central place and the last word.

8. **Vindication**
   The Stone (Jesus) rejected (by the Temple leadership) has become the Chief Cornerstone. The rights of the Messianic King that were affirmed in the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem are here repeated and clarified. At the time of telling the parable, Jesus was already ***"the head of the corner"***. That role was confirmed at the Resurrection.

9. **Judgement**
   Judgement in the parable is focused on the Temple leaders and not on the people. The crowd understood the meaning of the parable, but continued to support and protect Jesus. The judgement was milder than the Song of the Vineyard. The vineyard is not destroyed, rather a change to a more faithful leadership is promised. Grace is free and abounding, but judgement does not evaporate as a result.

   "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, But God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness. Otherwise, you too will be cut off." (Rom 11:22)