

Matthew 21:33-46 – A people called to bear fruit

Matthew 21

It's Palm Sunday.

Today we remember how, at the beginning of the week on which Jesus was betrayed and crucified, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds who accompanied him on that day shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David" – the Messiah. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And today we have palm crosses; we want to join in their celebration, praising and welcoming the Lord Jesus Christ.

The words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", come from Psalm 118. This psalm was composed to be sung by those accompanying the king on his way to the Temple in Jerusalem. In the words of this psalm, the crowds shout, "Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter."

King Jesus is the subject of the people's praise as he makes his way towards the Temple.

But will the gates be opened to Jesus, the righteous one of God? Will he be welcomed? Will he be recognised for who he is, the Lord come to his Temple?

No. He finds that the Temple has been turned into a marketplace. The leaders have turned it into a place for their own profit rather than giving the glory and honour to God.

Jesus throws out the traders and money-changers.

On the following day, far from being welcomed in the Temple, he is questioned and challenged: "Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?'" (Matt 21:23)

In response to their questioning, Jesus tells them two parables, the second of which, the parable of the vineyard and the tenants, was read to us this evening (Matt 21:33-40). It's about tenants who failed to give the owner of the vineyard the harvest that was his due; tenants who beat and killed the master's servants who were sent to them; tenants who finally rejected and killed the owner's son.

At first, the Jewish leaders seem to hear it only as a story. They are angry when they hear of the behaviour of these tenants and say to Jesus that the owner of such a vineyard would, "bring those wretches to a wretched end."

Then Jesus does to them what the prophet Nathan had done many years before to King David; he says, in effect, "You are those men; you are the tenants".

In this parable, Jesus has, as it were, sketched out the history of Israel – a people God had chosen and created to bring glory to his name, to bring the light of the knowledge of God to all the nations of the earth. They have failed to live up to their calling. In particular their leaders have led them in rebellion against God. They killed God's servants the prophets and now they are rejecting and planning to kill his Son.

In this parable, Jesus is speaking of his own death – only a few days away.

He, the righteous one, was not welcomed at the Temple. He was rejected and despised and cruelly put to death.

But this is not the end of the story. They may think, like the tenants in the parable, that they can get rid of the Son and the vineyard will be theirs to do with as they will. But, says Jesus, "Have you never read the Scriptures?" – how this must have stung them, for they prided themselves in their knowledge of the Scriptures. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

This quotation is also from Psalm 118. The Jewish leaders knew the psalm well but they had failed to understand it. They may reject and seek to destroy the Son – he has no place in the kingdom they want to build for themselves – but God will own him as both Lord and Christ. They may put him to death, but God will raise him from the dead and give him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

God has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. Yes?

The death of the Lord Jesus did not take God by surprise. It was not a mistake requiring a quick plan B. It was the reason Jesus was sent into the world. It was the very means by which he planned to tear through the veil in the Temple; to break down the barrier between human beings and the living God; to throw open the gates of the kingdom that *all* might go in.

That's what Jesus means when he says, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you [a faithless people] and given to a people who will produce its fruit." – a people who will give God all that is his due.

The kingdom is open to all who will welcome Christ: not just Jews but Jew and Gentile alike – a people from every nation, tribe and tongue. Jesus has thrown open the gate of the Temple – opened up the way into the very presence of God for all who will come to him.

And we who have come to God through the Lord Jesus Christ are this people to whom the kingdom has now been given – a people called to bear fruit. This fruit find's its origin in the Lord Jesus himself. He is the seed that must die if it is to bear fruit. And now through the power of his death and risen life he calls us to bear fruit to God.

And this is the challenge for us today; will we be a people who produce the fruit that God seeks?

What is that fruit?

It is lives which honour God and bring glory to him as we welcome Christ and live in close communion with him – like branches in a vine.

It is lives that recognise that Jesus is Lord, Lord of every part and moment of our lives so that we live always from him and to him – lives not dominated by money, power and self-seeking like the traders in the Temple or the tenants in the vineyard. It is lives which are shaped by the love of God and which draw others into the life of the kingdom – attractive lives shaped by the character of Christ, filled with the fruit of his Spirit. It is lives that bear fruit, abundant fruit.

And this is our calling not only as individuals but as a church – the community of God's people. We are to be a people among whom Christ evidently dwells; a church where all that we do is shaped by him, is responsive to him; a vineyard bearing fruit that will last.

Jesus comes seeking fruit.

As we welcome Jesus with our palm crosses let us be a people who give him the fruit which is his due; a people whose lives bring glory to God and healing to a damaged world.

Peter Misselbrook – 13/04/2014