

Sunday January 22nd, 2022

Luke 20:9-19
"Consequences"

It might surprise you to learn that the bully I faced in school still takes my lunch money. Mind you he makes a great sandwich at Subway. Did you have a bully growing up or was bullied at some time? Even as adults we can still get bullied by employers, neighbours, and even family members. With the onset of the internet, cyber bullying has become a real threat to young people in particular. Remember when we were told in the face of bullying?

"Stick and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me!" You've no doubt heard that little rhyme, and you've probably even used it at times. When I was growing up it was the standard playground retort to an insult. There is a problem however with this phrase. We all know that those words were simply a bluff. They had as much value as the rhyme itself. Words have a tremendous capacity to hurt far greater than any sticks or stones.

I'm sure, looking around the room today, that there are people here who are still bearing the scars of things people have said to them in the past; even the long gone past. Not that all words of insult hurt as much as each other. Words that come out as a slip of the tongue, are not nearly as painful as those that are premeditated, that are aimed at hurting us. And the pain is magnified if they come from someone close to us; from a child, or a brother, or sister, or parent.

But that sort of insult pales into insignificance when compared to the insult that Jesus is telling us about in Luke 20. If you want, you can describe this as the ultimate insult, because it's delivered not against a fellow human being, but against the loving, the long-suffering heart of God himself. This is the last parable in Luke's gospel, and perhaps the last that Jesus ever told. In fact, there's some argument about whether this is a parable at all.

Some scholars believe that this parable it's more of an allegory where, unlike the other parables, the meaning is barely hidden in details of the story itself. Certainly, the scribes and the chief priests, at the end of the parable, have no trouble working out what it means. So, let's look at it to see what Jesus has to teach us by it.

You may remember that just before this passage Jesus told the parable of the 10 pounds just as he was about to enter Jerusalem. This parable is quite similar to the parable of the talents we looked at earlier. The setting is that Jesus has entered the city with quite a fanfare, and the first thing he's done is to drive out the money changers and merchants from the temple precincts.

This of course doesn't make the Pharisees and Chief Priests very happy, (they likely got a cut from the sales) so they challenge him on where he gets the authority for an act like that. Demanding the source of authority is one of the first things we do when confronted by someone telling us, what to do. Jesus' response is to turn the tables back on them. He asks them how they understood John's baptism - was it from heaven, or was it of human origin.

In other words, where did John's authority come from? Well, that puts them in a bit of a spin, and while they're fumbling about for an answer, he tells them this story.

He begins by saying: "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time." Now for Jesus' listeners this would have rung loud bells. The vineyard was a well-known OT metaphor for the Nation of Israel. In Isaiah 5, God tells Israel how he planted a vineyard, but when he came to harvest it, all he could find was bad fruit. It was such a famous parable of the failure of Israel, that Jesus' hearers couldn't have helped but think of it as they listened to this parable.

And as the parable progresses, it becomes more and more clear that he's pointing the finger of criticism at them. Elsewhere he accuses them of being no better than their forefathers who killed the prophets (Lk 11:47-49) and here he goes further in predicting that they'll even kill God's only son.

At first the story only indicates their greed, and their impudence towards the owner. But as the story progresses, we find the true motivation behind this incredible act of rebellion. v14: "But when the tenants saw the son, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.'" The true motivation behind their action is this: although they've been placed in the vineyard as tenants, they don't want to acknowledge the true owner of the vineyard. They want to be the owners themselves.

Now, the danger when we read a parable like this, is to see what Jesus is saying in the original context, that is, that the Jewish leaders have rejected God's rule over them, and are about to reject God's Son as well; and to leave it there. We think what terrible people these hypocritical chief priests and scribes were, and we think that's all there is to learn from it. But that's to miss the sting in the tale.

Because what Jesus is describing here is the condition of every fallen human being. The vineyard is a picture not just of Israel, but of the whole world. All of us have been put on this earth as tenants in God's vineyard. And what's our response? We don't want to be tenants, paying rent. We want to be the owners. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden in the first place, and given the task of tending it and what happened?

They decided it would be good to be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil. And human beings have been doing the same thing ever since. The people of Israel from the moment God liberated them from Egypt, kept on turning away from the true worship of God to idols, until, eventually, God expelled them from the promised land and sent them into exile. The Kings of Israel, present a long line of failure after failure to do what was right, with the odd exception.

And it's continued right through to our own day. A hundred years ago, humanist philosophers were predicting a golden age, where God would be irrelevant. When poverty, disease, war; would all be done away with. Human advances in science, and medicine, and sociology, would solve all our problems for us. Well, 100 years later we look around our world and see incurable diseases still rife, wars happening with an increasing regularity, relationships breaking down at an alarming rate and we wonder how could things have got so bad?

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What's gone wrong in God's vineyard? The answer seems clear enough. People are still wanting to run the vineyard themselves, rather than follow God's direction.

This is the root source of the ecological problems in our world. Here are why millions are starving while a small number waste the world's food resources. Here's why the socialist dreams of the communist bloc failed to materialise. Here's why 40% of marriages end in divorce. Why? Because none of us want to follow someone else's agenda. We want to be the owners, not the tenants.

And can I just say that this is just as much a problem in the Church. Someone was joking recently that one denomination's method of church growth is to have a fight and split the church. But it isn't a joke, is it? How many new denominations, or independent churches have sprung up in the past century that way? All because people didn't want to follow someone else's lead. Such as the case I now share with you.

In Dwight Pentecost's commentary on the book of Philippians he refers to an occurrence of a church split in Dallas Texas. The church split was so bad that it involved a legal suit of one side of the church against the other over who had the right of ownership of the church property. The case went all the way to the State Supreme Court. It was dismissed on the grounds that the State Supreme Court was not going to deal with inner church issues but they would have to be dealt with by the denominational church governing body.

The matter was finally settled with one side being given the ownership rights to the property. During this period of time a local news paper reporter did some investigating on the cause of this church split. He discovered that it all started during a church dinner. Apparently one of the church elders was offended when the portion of food given to him was not as large as the young person next to him. This whole church split started because someone was offended over such a petty thing.

As you listen to this story you notice 2 things. First, the insane insolence of the tenants. This is a rebellion that's doomed to failure. Yet they seem to think they can get away with it. How can we puny creatures think we can shake our fists at God and not suffer any consequences? How can we go on rejecting anything and anyone that God sends to remind us of the debt we owe him, and think we can get away with it?

There's no way God will put up with that sort of thing! Is there? Here's the 2nd interesting thing you discover. The amazing thing about this story is that the owner, that is God, tolerates their rebellion for so long. Here's the amazing thing about the Biblical story. God's incomprehensible concern for us. The lengths to which God will go to keep us on track, to maintain contact with us, despite our stubbornness and blind ignorance. And of course, the length to which God will go is to send his own Son on a rescue mission. Jesus' Mission

You see the response of the owner to the repeated refusal to listen to his envoys, is to decide to send his own son in a last attempt to talk reason to them. Now notice how Jesus at this point answers the question about authority posed by the chief priests in v2, as he identifies himself as that Son, as the unique, the beloved, Son of God.

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And notice that that claim is as important today as it was in Jesus' day. There are still people in the church today who want to downplay, or even deny, the deity of Christ. I heard about someone the other day who wrote about a time his father was talking to his local minister commenting on the difficulty he had with the idea of Jesus' resurrection, and the minister replied, "that's OK I have the same trouble.

In fact, I don't really believe the resurrection happened at all." Well, what sort of a state is the church in if its leaders don't believe in the deity of Christ?

The leaders of Jesus' day didn't, of course, and as a result, they put him to death. One can only think that had Jesus come today his end would have been the same. Rejected by those he came to save. Put to death because we didn't want to submit to God's authority. Because we wanted to be the owners, not the tenants.

What's clear in this story is that Jesus understands what awaits him at the end of the week. He's clearly predicting his death at the hands of those God has put in charge of his nation.

But equally clear is Jesus' understanding of the long-term future. He knows that the eternal gospel doesn't allow for anyone to run the vineyard except God himself. Listen to how the angels in Rev 14 announce the eternal Gospel: (Rev 14:6-7 NRSV) "Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation and tribe and language and people.

He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

"The eternal Gospel which has been proclaimed from the beginning right through to the end is this: God is to be worshipped and glorified. He is the only God.

We are all of us judged every day. We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. We are judged by the faces of the people we do not love. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.

The New Testament proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.

Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ's love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ's love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering that Love has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one. *Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words*

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So it is that God's servants still come to the vineyard to urge us to produce good fruit. Do we listen? Do we send them away? Do we injure them in some way because we refuse to accept their call on our lives? So, it is, the Son of God still comes to plead with us, to recognize whose vineyard this is, and our presence and whatever rewards we receive while we toil in the vineyard, are here by the grace of God who owns the vineyard.

The stone which was rejected by Israel, by countless generations of people and many people today, is in fact the corner stone. The source of strength and stability for everything that is good, and full of hope. And that truth ultimately cost Jesus his life, all so we could know life and know it in abundance.