

Sermon Notes - 3rd April 2022

Parables of Condemnation Luke 20:1-19 (The Tenants)

Over the past few weeks, we have been listening to some of the stories that Jesus told – his parables. Some, perhaps, are more familiar than others: “The Good Samaritan” and “The Prodigal Son” are stories that we might know well. Others, however, like the “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” or “The parable of the talents” may seem strange.

Perhaps a question we should have asked some weeks ago, at the start of this sermon series is “why?” “Why did Jesus speak in parables?” We might be tempted here to say, in a didactic sense, that it is because stories make for great teaching aids, we remember a good story. And that is certainly true, but the answer must go deeper than that, because the very first of Jesus’ parables, the Parable of the Sower, was deliberately designed to conceal his message, to really get his audience thinking. In fact, that seems to be common to all parables, that they somehow challenge us to think creatively about what life is like in God’s kingdom.

But today, we come across a new kind of parable, we might call it “a parable of condemnation.” A story Jesus used to publicly condemn at least part of his live audience. And it’s uncomfortable, it’s adversarial. And it’s a form of story Jesus deliberately used during his final week in Jerusalem. And it’s a form of story Jesus used to confront the abuse of power.

Although Palm Sunday isn’t until next week, we are going to skip ahead in our Lenten journeys momentarily to hear the sort of stories that Jesus told in Jerusalem, days before his arrest and execution. Indeed, this is a story Jesus told in the temple courts somewhere between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. And we can feel how the tone of Jesus’ stories changes, they feel darker, more pointed as if to confront and stir up conflict. And importantly, we see how they are received by a new audience, not the crowds which followed him from Galilee, not the crowd which adored him, but rather, we see how they are received by the leaders and rulers of the city.

So let’s hear this story, a parable of condemnation, which Jesus told to confront the abuse of power.

... [read gospel passage]

Parables of condemnation, stories which are told to confront abuses of power were not new in Jesus’ day. Indeed, the great King David, had himself been challenged by such a story many generations before.

You may know this part of the Bible. The story goes, that King David had a friend called Uriah, a soldier serving on active campaign. And one morning, from the luxury of his terrace, King David saw Uriah’s wife Bathsheba bathing. And David desired her, and arranged for her to come to the palace, where he took advantage of her. Some weeks later, it was discovered that she was pregnant, and to hide his infidelity, David recalled Uriah home from the frontline under false pretences. He asked Uriah for a report on how the war was progressing. After

Uriah's report, the king told him to go home to be with Bathsheba, to rest up, before going back to the frontline. But faithful Uriah said, "how can I go home, when my comrades are camping out on the frontline." And he refused David's request. So, in the morning, David sent Uriah back to the front line, carrying a secret message for his commander. Unknown to Uriah, he was carrying his own death warrant. David ordered Uriah to be moved to where the fighting was at its most fierce and then for his comrades to withdraw, leaving him alone in enemy territory where death would be certain. Sure enough, faithful Uriah died. But this thing was not hidden from God who sent Nathan to confront the king. And Nathan told the king this parable of condemnation:

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ "Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

This is perhaps the most famous parable of condemnation; David's abuse of power was laid bare, and he repented. But what of Jesus' story? Did that have the same effect on the chief priests, scribes and elders?

You see, Jesus had come to Jerusalem, where anyone who was anyone was in some way connected to the temple. And here we must remember that the ancient temple in Jerusalem was like Westminster and Canterbury Cathedral rolled into one, it was the centre of political and religious life. If you wanted to get ahead in life, you needed to have connections with those in the temple at Jerusalem. But Jesus didn't play this game. The temple wasn't an opportunity to further his career, but a place of worship.

Jesus had barely been in Jerusalem 24 hours and already he was upsetting the status quo. In the triumphal entry, he brought a crowd with him, who proclaimed him to be a King greater than David, now come home to rule. The next day, he overturned the merchants' tables in the temple court, where people bought and sold, and where the elders and chief priests made a tidy profit. In the day he taught in the temple complex and astounded the crowd with his words, who honoured him with their attention and amazement.

And so the question the Scribes put to Jesus, is simply this: “Who do you think you are, to come in here, to say and to do these things? Who or what gives you the authority to upset the comfortable status quo we have established here?”

And it is to that question, that Jesus responds with this parable, the parable of condemnation, spoken to confront the abuse of power.

In this story, the people of Israel are the vineyard. An image which was famously used by the prophet Isaiah. The chief priests and elders are the worthless tenants, who shamefully treated the servants sent to them, who are in turn, the prophets. This is an inglorious picture of biblical Israel’s history.

But where are we in this story? We have seen before now, that it can sometimes be a fruitful exercise to imagine ourselves into the setting of the story. So where do we situate ourselves here?

What if we thought about the Vineyard as the Church? Are we faithfully keeping the vineyard? A good test for this is how we respond to Jesus’ authority. When we are truly confronted with Jesus’ message of life and of hope, do we join the celebration, or do we feel the comfortable status quo we have set up for ourselves come under threat? Do we find ourselves turning on Jesus, and interrogating him with the same question: “Who do you think you are coming in here, saying and doing these things?”

As we stand on the brink of Easter week, a powerful thing to reflect on and consider, is whether it is possible for the Church, like the temple, to gradually shift from being a house of prayer, to a place of self-promotion? Is it possible for the Church, like the temple, to gradually shift from being a house of prayer, to a place of self-promotion?

“Who is Jesus to come in here and say and do these things?” He is, as the parable says, “the beloved son.” May we all be faithful stewards of his precious Church, as we move into Easter week and beyond.