

A Challenge to the In Group

Preached by Murray Wills
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8am St James' ; 9am All Saints'

Matthew 21:33-46

Sometimes, conflicts between people get very hot and they just accelerate until that conflict finally explodes.

Three years ago I found myself in the unfortunate position of being in the midst of a couple of conflicts in Istanbul. I'll tell you the one that does not involve tear gas, and water cannons, and you can ask me about that one afterwards!

Within an hour of arriving a taxi driver, despite being shown the name of the hotel I wanted to go to in Turkish, took me to the wrong one.

I found myself on the wrong side of the Bosphorus sea, which cuts Istanbul in half; in Asia, instead of Europe. I arrived at the hotel and a staff member welcomed me. Then the fireworks happened.

On finding out that I was a New Zealander (a special category in Turkey), and that the Taxi driver had taken me to the wrong hotel, more than 10 staff appeared and proceeded to have an extremely heated discussion with the driver. Arms flying, voices shouting and as close to actual physical contact as you can get.

"It was one of those times when you start to feel very uncomfortable and I found myself thinking "I am in the wrong place at the wrong time here". The scene is still etched in my mind.

I was slightly miffed to have been taken to the wrong place (it was an adventure), but philosophical about just getting to the other hotel, on the other side of the city. These things happen.

At that stage I had been travelling for over 30 hours and, had had no sleep, and I knew had an important video conference back to NZ to attend in an hour or two.

The Turkish hotel staff were having none of it however. The discussion became extremely intense amongst the gathered crowd and there was in my mind anyway, a very real chance of serious violence as things seemed to escalate very quickly.

Thankfully I managed to persuade them that, whilst they thought they were acting on behalf of me; a visitor; I actually wished the driver well and that all I wanted was to get to the right hotel. Eventually they insisted on calling me another taxi; sent the other one on its way (which required more chastisement by them) and they instructed the new driver on what he was to do, where he was to go and how I was to be treated.

Have you ever been in a situation where a conflict grows hotter and hotter and is at exploding point?

This is the background to our Gospel reading from Matthew today.

A conflict, between Jesus and the Pharisees, began early in his ministry. Jesus had had dinner with the so-called scum of society: tax collectors, other sinners and prostitutes. Right at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus was hanging out with the wrong people, in the eyes of the Pharisees (the In Group).

Pretty soon Jesus was doing other things to offend the Pharisees. He violated the Sabbath regulations that the Pharisees were imposing on the people. Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, and as early in the Jesus story as Mark 3:6, the New Testament says that the "Pharisees held counsel with the Herodians on how to destroy him."

In other words, from the very start the Pharisees were out to kill Jesus.

Three years passed and that conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was growing hotter and hotter by the week and finally in the last week of Jesus' ministry, it was to the exploding point. In fact there are thirteen consecutive incidents of a growing conflict and tension between Jesus and the Pharisees.

In Matthew 21-24 Jesus had cast out the money changers from the Temple, overturning tables and saying that the leaders made God's temple a den of robbers. Jesus then came from that temple and saw a fig tree that produced no fruit and cursed that fig tree and it withered on the spot.

That is the way the Pharisees were: they looked good and green like a lush tree. They looked like the In Group, but there was no fruit on that fine looking tree.

In our Gospel reading today from Matthew it is festival season in Jerusalem, and the last thing that the authorities want is a disturbance or riot.

The parable that Jesus tells is a parable directed right at the Pharisees.

So let's remind ourselves of the Gospel parable:

There was a man who was the owner of a vineyard. The owner took a trip and put his vineyard under the care of some tenants. These tenants were expected to make a payment to the owner for the rental of the vineyard. The owner was gone for a while. None of this was unusual at this time.

The owner sent a messenger to collect the payment due and the tenants beat up them up. The owner then sent a second person to collect the payment due and the tenants beat him up and killed him. The owner then sent many envoys to collect the payment due and the tenants beat them up and killed them too.

But the owner was persistent. He finally sent his son, his heir to collect the money due. The owner thought to himself, "They will surely respect my own son." But the tenants killed the owner's son. Imagine that. The tenants said among themselves: "Let's kill the son and so we will have the inheritance. The vineyard will be ours and we won't have to pay rent."

And Jesus continued the story... What will the owner do? He will come and kill those evil tenants and find new tenants who will pay him the rent that is due.

In other words, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you Pharisees and given to people who will pay the rent and produce the fruit of righteousness.

The Gospel of Matthew adds, "When the Pharisee's realised that he told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him (and have him killed), but they feared the crowd and went away."

They would wait, until another time, at night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the crowd wasn't around. The Pharisees would then arrest him and have him killed.

That was the Pharisee's goal: to kill the Son. They had already killed the messengers of the owner.

The Pharisees wanted the vineyard for themselves. These leaders silenced the prophets of God, who God had sent to them throughout the Old Testament. They silenced the voice of God who was saying to them, "I own this vineyard. It is mine.

The rent is a righteous life of goodness, kindness and mercy. The Pharisees silenced these representatives from God again and again in the Old Testament by killing them. And then God finally sent his Son, Jesus, the heir of the vineyard, the future owner of the vineyard. And they killed the Son too.

In telling this parable Jesus wanted the Pharisees to know that God knew they were the ones who killed the prophets. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to know that he knew that they were going to kill him in the near future, and he wanted the Pharisees to know that they would be punished by God for killing the prophets of old, for killing the Son, and for not producing the fruit of righteous lives that God had rightfully expected of them.

Verse 43 in our Gospel reading declares that:

'People' will replace Israel's leaders and carry responsibility for enabling Israel to bear fruit. This is not a new group of leaders but a community, the church.

This community will now hold the keys of the kingdom. It will now carry responsibility for tending the vineyard. There is a new head of the corner. The rejected stone and his people will assume leadership.

So how does this parable of Jesus apply to us today in our world twenty-one centuries later?

What is the rent God expects from us?

- God's concern is for all fruit to be good —"the fruit of righteousness" (James 3:18).
- That we live a life of love, kindness and compassion.
- That we love God with all our heart, mind and soul and our neighbour as our self.
- We do what we have been asked to do, and what has been demonstrated by Jesus.
- We build a relationship with God today so that we can learn to listen to the voice of God and respond.

Just as then, God wants us to be fruitful and multiply. Our Creator expects us to grow fruit as payment for living in God's vineyard.

In order to sustain growth, we have to be a bit like a vineyard though also and to mirror how Jesus lived in rhythm, or balance.

Vineyards do not happen overnight, in fact vines are cut back or pruned for a few years to strengthen the branch and roots. No branch can bear fruit by itself according to John 15: It must remain in the vine, just as we must remain in community.

We must go through cycles as Jesus taught us of Rest and Work, of Abiding and Fruitfulness, of Pruning and Growing. It is through establishing the right rhythm that growth will occur.

God gives us spiritual gifts and expects us to use them in our ministry or we run the risk of them being taken away. God also expects us to listen to the voice of messengers that are sent into our life just as in our parable, and doesn't expect us to silence the voice of God, to ignore or push it away like the Pharisees.

If we distance ourselves from story by saying, "You tell 'em--those rotten Pharisees," then we might miss the imperative aimed at us, as new tenants?

- If we believe that the Christian church is the vineyard's new tenants, then how are we doing?
- Let's be a church harvesting the fruit of witness and compassion, mission and transformation?
- When the land owner backs up the trucks to load the harvest, what will our church have to load?

Let's repeat the Collect together:

Collect: Loving God, yours is the vineyard and the harvest. Help us to recognise the one you send and to follow him. Make us willing workers in your vineyard, so that we may offer you an abundant harvest. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.