

A Parable of Parables

Matthew 21: 33-46

With the Easter season still fresh in our minds I would like to retell a message from 2012 which seems appropriate for Communion Sunday today.

And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of an ass."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:1–9)

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:37–39)

In Chapter 21 Jesus comes to Jerusalem in a new role. In prior visits he had entered the city unobtrusively. Now He presses his claims as King upon the city of the King. Nothing could be more forward or daring, He cleanses the temple for the second time, he curses the fig tree. He meets the challenges of the religious rulers and by parable accuses them of plotting his death. Jesus is forcing the issue now. He will force them to act

when and how he chooses. He is in full control of the entire situation and he is never more kingly than when he approaches the cross. When he entered Jerusalem on a donkey it is assumed that this was a display of meekness but not so – a donkey was a symbol of peace while the horse a symbol of war. When Jesus came in to Jerusalem riding on this little animal of peace, He was offering himself as King. The prophet Zechariah said that he, the King, would be riding on a donkey humbly into Jerusalem (daughter of Zion)

Now that we've set the scene I'd like you to indulge my telling you a story this morning. You know how Jesus often spoke in parables in order to make his point. Here is my parable on the parable related in Matthew 21: 33-44 parables. Taken from Jesus most pointed parable yet. It is his final warning to the religious leaders. When in the parable of the householder he says that "last of all he sent his son unto them" little did they know that the Son was standing right before them giving them the parable. What are they going to do with God's son? He is telling them right now what is in their hearts. So here goes....

Once there was a king who reigned over the whole earth. He was a good king and very powerful. He loved his subjects and governed the whole earth with perfect justice. No one could find fault with him. No one ever rebelled because the king was an inferior king. Where there was rebellion, it was only because the people wanted to be kings themselves.

And it came to pass that the king decided to plant a beautiful vineyard, to yield fruit for his court and for all the earth. He supervised the work himself. He planted the vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower. And then he chose one of the poorest clans in his realm to be the tenants of his vineyard, and he promised them all the help they needed if they would but ask him and trust him to give it. It was an almost unbelievable privilege to be chosen by the great king to tend his vineyard. And in the early days the tenants loved their work. They could scarcely call it work. The king gave them all they needed, he let them eat the fruit, he guarded their borders, and sent his messengers to them often. It was as if he were doing the work.

But that became a problem. *Because soon the attitudes of the tenants began to change.* They didn't like the idea of giving the king all the credit for their produce. In fact, they didn't like the idea of being tenants at all. They began to want to be owners. Owners get the produce; owners get the rent;

owners get all the glory, especially when they do so much of the work. So deep inside the tenants wanted to be the owner. They wanted to be their own boss and not rely on the patronizing help of the king.

And so a terrible thing happened. One day the king sent his servants to receive a load of fruit from his vineyard. But they found no one at the winepress or in the barns or in the vineyard. These servants were three of the most faithful messengers of the king. They were duly commissioned and stood in the king's place. They became very tense at the strange silence in the vineyard. There were no birds. There had always been birds. There were no children. There had always been children. There was no music. There had always been music.

But then, suddenly from everywhere, the angry tenants emerged, and the servants of the king were surrounded. Those who didn't have sharp pruning hooks in their hands held large jagged stones. The servants of the king were armed with nothing but the king's message and the memory of his words as they left the palace. He had said,

Though arrogance and rage assail,
Conspiracy will not prevail.
In death recall unerringly
That you will always reign with me.

With that they were better armed than the wicked tenants. But not against the pruning hooks. The tenants rushed upon them and grabbed the two younger messengers and made them watch while they beheaded the faithful old man with a pruning hook. They could hear him whispering the king's promise until the blow fell. He really believed it.

In death recall unerringly
That you will always reign with me.

Then they turned on the younger servants and beat one and stoned the other and sent them back to the king half dead with a message:

We've had enough of sovereign care,
We see no need with you to share.
You have your kingdoms, fields and towers,
Go now, rule yours, and we'll rule ours.

When the king heard this, and how his friend and servant had been slain, he went away and took counsel with himself in the royal chamber. All the

court expected him to emerge arrayed for battle, for they knew he was a mighty warrior and deeply loved his messengers. But when he appeared, he did not gather an army; he called around him six of his most loyal ambassadors and asked, "Who is willing to go for me and deliver my message to the tenants of the vineyard?" The ambassadors were startled and said, "What message, my lord?" The king opened the scroll and read,

Of me it has been said of old,
It magnifies my strength to hold
In check my wrath, restrain my woes,
And offer mercy to my foes.
Turn now and bend the knee to me,
And I'll forgive your treachery.

He looked up again and said, "Who is willing to go for me and deliver my word to the tenants of the vineyard?" And all six stepped forward. For there was no greater honor in the realm than to bear the message of the king. The king took each one by the hand, looked into his eyes, and said, as if he were the only person in the world,

Though arrogance and rage assail
Conspiracy will not prevail.
In death recall unerringly
That you will always reign with me.

And with that as their only weapon they journeyed to the king's vineyard. When they saw guards, they paused outside the gate and renewed their vows of loyalty to the king. They entered a solemn covenant not to avenge one another, even if their hearts should break. As soon as they entered the gate, they were captured, bound, and taken before the leaders. The king's message was read. And the tenants were enflamed with rage. Three of the ambassadors they killed, two they stoned almost to death, and one they flogged until he passed out. They loaded the three dying ambassadors with the three mutilated bodies on a cart and sent them back to the king with this message:

If we should ever want a king,
If we should ever want to bring
Our homage to a royal seat,
Know this: we'll stand upon our feet,
And ask no mercy, bend no knee,
We'll build our own if need should be.

When the good king read this message and saw the bodies of his beloved ambassadors, he paused only an instant, then he turned and walked to the chamber of his son, spoke briefly, and the two of them went on a long journey into the hills, alone. Meanwhile, the palace of the king was full of commotion and noise and planning. The mighty men were preparing for war. The blood of the martyr-messengers was screaming for justice to be done. The desecration of the king's name was an intolerable offence to those who loved him and served him day and night. The chariots were assembled. The armor was shined, the swords and spears sharpened, and thousands upon thousands gathered at the palace of the king and waited. And at the head of the camp stood the great white stallion—the largest, strongest, most beautiful horse in the realm. Only one person could ride the stallion and lead the king's forces against the treacherous tenants—the son, the king's only son. Soon the king and his son would come out of their silence arrayed for battle. Soon the strategy of the hills would be revealed. It would be an incomparable battle plan—the son upon his mighty stallion, and ten thousand thousand warriors in his train.

Early one morning they were spotted coming down out of the hills. And a great silence fell across the armies. What they saw was utterly beyond comprehension. The king was dressed in mourning garments, leading a donkey with a rope, and on the donkey sat the son dressed like a common beggar. They entered and passed through the camp, and as they passed, the warriors bowed to the ground.

What had happened in the hills? What strange plan had these two made? It had not been done in haste. And no one has been consulted. (There are no counselors in the court of this king.) It was a strategy from the depths of the king's love and wisdom. For He so loved the world. And the son had joyfully agreed.

They passed through the armies without a word. At the far edge of the palace grounds nearest the territory of the vineyard they stopped. The king embraced the son and whispered just for him:

Though arrogance and rage assail
Conspiracy will not prevail.
In death recall unerringly
That you will always reign with me.

After the son rode off alone on the donkey, the king turned back to his loyal subjects. They suspected what he was doing, but could scarcely believe it.

The wicked tenants wouldn't just kill him. They would humiliate him and torture him. It was hard enough to understand that the all-wise king would send his six beloved ambassadors to certain death. *But now his son, his only son, to be toyed with and destroyed by worthless scoundrels?* The king knew the armies expected some word of explanation. So he took his stand before them in his mourning garments and simply said:

When we have given all we can
Then we will fight, but only then.

So the armies of the realm kept themselves in readiness. And the king sat down on his throne.

The word spread everywhere and ran ahead of the king's son. By the time he arrived at the gate of the vineyard, there was quite a stir. The king's son had never left the palace. He had never visited any realm. Most of the people found it incredible—the king's son does not dress like a beggar and ride on a donkey. He wears white and purple robes and rides a white stallion, as the old books say. But the loyal old subjects of the king, who knew him well, recognized the son. They knew when they had seen the son, they had seen the king. And they were fearful of what was about to happen.

And the children! All the children loved him. Even as he entered the awful gate of the vineyard, no one could stop the children. They ran and leaped and cheered and threw branches in his path. It didn't make any difference to the children that he looked poor. Children haven't learned yet that a person must be rich to be happy. They saw the eyes of love. They had no trouble with childlike submission to the king. So for them the visit of the son was wonderful. "Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." "Long live the king! Long live the king's son!" they cried.

The wicked grown-up tenants watched from a distance. They could hardly believe that the king was so foolish. They said to each other, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance for ourselves." And as they plotted the death of the king's son, the children chanted over and over (as children do):

Great is the son! Great is the son!
Who comes in the name of the king.
He is the one! He is the one!
All homage to him we bring.

Finally the chanting faded. The children returned home. The king's son looked out over the vineyards. The soil was rich and moist. The vines were thick and strong. The branches were heavy with the finest grapes—the king's grapes. And he wept over the treason of the wicked tenants and the desecration of his father's name.

When he lifted up his head, he was surrounded by armed men. He steadied himself with the king's promise. Then, reaching into his simple cloak, he pulled out a scroll and said, "I have a word from the king." "And we a word for him," the leader replied. "Come, let us trade our messages." The king's son opened the scroll and read these words,

It is not seemly for a king
To beg his subjects that they bring
Him love. But I do not delight
In mustering my awesome might
To end your lives for evermore.
I send my only son, therefore,
With news that I will yet forgive
And let those who repent still live.

"Is that all?" they sneered. "No; my father said I should add this: Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you sing with the children, 'Great is the son! Great is the son! Who comes in the name of the king.'" "And what is that supposed to mean?" they snarled. "It means that for you mercy has almost come to an end. Soon your houses will be empty and you will be no more. And the vineyard will be given to a new and faithful people. And I will return to this place on the great white stallion. And by the magnificent mercy of my father a new generation will welcome me with palms and grapes and love and happy submission to the king."

O, The wicked tenants stopped their ears when they heard the word, "submission," and the leader cried out, "Now, here is our message for your king." And they rushed upon the king's son, beat him mercilessly, dragged him out of the city to the highest hill for all to see, and nailed his hands and feet like a poster to a tree, and mocked.

If the wicked tenants had been able to read his lips, they would have known what carried him through the ordeal:

Though arrogance and rage assail
Conspiracy will not prevail.
In death recall unerringly
That you will always reign with me.

As he died, he lifted up his eyes toward the region of the palace of his father, and he saw the armies of the king, ten thousand thousand, with arms lifted in salute to the valor of the king's son. And standing alone before the myriads, the king himself, holding the golden reigns of the great white stallion, waiting, waiting, waiting.....It is not "The End."

On this Sunday I'd like to point you to the book of Revelation as it pictures the final fulfillment in the age to come like this:

I looked and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9, 10)

Father we confess that you are the rock which the builders rejected but now have become the cornerstone on which your church has been built For no other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.