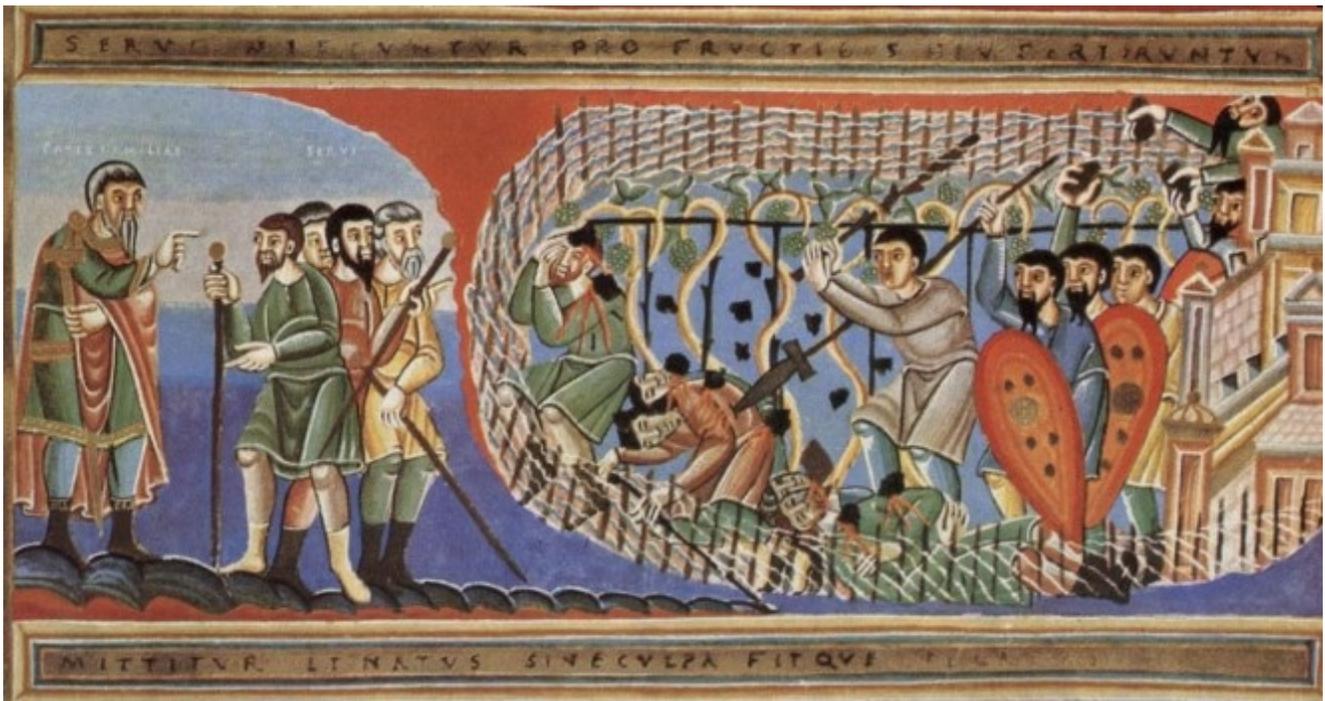


“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?”

Last Sunday Jesus taught us a lesson in what real repentance is and is not, by telling us the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Then our focus was on the individual sinner; today he is teaching about how we together as his church, and especially as a community with leaders, must also learn to examine ourselves collectively. For is a public season for



us to observe as the Body of Christ, not merely for each of us to be individually penitent. After all, even as our hymnals provide forms for confessing our sins both as individual sinners and as a sinful congregation.

Now we are more accustomed to, and comfortable with, reflecting on God’s Holy Commandments and seeking his pardon individually. Yet an entire parish can go astray, often because someone leads it in the wrong direction. Lent always begins on Ash Wednesday, when we hear the prophet Joel 2 summoning all God’s people. But he aims that summons first at the ordained priesthood, the men charged & anointed to teach the Torah to the people. In Joel we see them leading the penitential procession, not to show off their office, but as a way of admitting how poorly they have performed it.

In the history of God’s Elect, never did it become more visible just how far leaders can lead astray than when the Messiah was born at last and came to his own people. Almost at once, and then more every month, the very leaders who had taught the people to wait and pray for the coming of the Messiah began looking for ways to do away with him. That, of course, is what this morning’s parable by Jesus is all about.

How rarely does the Church, who urges her members to repent, herself consider repenting! It doesn't dawn on the Church to repent! Repent of what? Of becoming a church that exists and works to serve and satisfy itself! The same disease that dwelled in Israel in Jeremiah's day lived on in the time of Christ – a love for God's building coupled with a failure to build up the faithful into a spiritual temple; a love for the sounds of liturgy joined by a despising of God's Word. A life of disciplines and programs that fill calendars but have nothing to do with holy living.

Under the mis-leadership of the Pharisees & Sadducees, the Jews of Jesus' day had become zealous for pilgrimages, dietary laws, and sacrifices. But it had become a religion that jettisoned God's burning concern for righteousness and compassion. Therefore, when our Lord went forth to rebuke sin and demand repentance, he firsts took aim at those who should have known and taught better.

In this respect, Christ traced the footsteps of Israel's prophets, who in past generations had repeatedly warned Israel in the same way. Some of them received rough treatment, to say the least – Israel was not beyond killing the prophets who were most faithful and paying good salaries to the liars. Now, Jesus knew this would happen to him! In fact, the fact that he knew it is what makes today's Gospel good news! The Parable of the Wicked Tenants preaches a message of promise and hope.

Notice first how the story does not match the real situation, because in the story the vineyard-owner is totally ignorant of how evil the tenants are. He blissfully hopes they will respect & obey his son. But obviously Jesus doesn't think this – or he wouldn't be telling the parable. The truth is that the teller of the parable and his Father both know that...

"...they will scourge him and kill him, and on the third day he will rise.

God's Good News in the Parable of Wicked Tenants rests not in some detail of the story, but in the fact that Christ the Victim tells it! He knows he will die, he intends to die at their hands, so that anyone who comes to faith in him will be forgiven, and become an heir of eternal life.

For he truly is God's Son and Heir, and not just one more prophetic servant. His death will be his gift to the world, not just another murder by the enemies of God's Word. And the vineyard will not vanish, but be given to all – Jew and Gentile alike – who repent of their rebellion against God, seek his pardon, and promise to be faithful! The fulfillment of this parable shall be not only in his crucifixion, but also in his exaltation to God's Right Hand. The church will pray to Christ raised and glorified, and he himself will meet Saul on the road and make him an Apostle. Christ raised and glorified will build his Church as the New Israel. The Jerusalem Temple will pass away, and the saving Gospel will travel into every nation.

This parable not only foretells the death of Christ, as well as the relationship between the Jews and the Christian Church – it also warns the Church not to become like those who put our Lord to death! Part of Saint Luke's Evangelical Insight, one gift of the Spirit that distinguishes Luke's Gospel, is how episodes of hostility against Christ are described, not so that Christians can point their fingers at the Jews and say, "Boy, were you people stupid and wicked," but in a way that makes us realize who we face the same pitfalls.

The wealth and power of Constantinople, for example, made it unthinkable to the Church that in the 15th century she could be cast down by Muslim invasions. Yet she was cast down, and only after her corruption had grown enormous over generations. Likewise, the material splendor of the Western Church made her so humanly glorious that neither the emperor nor the people deemed a certain German Augustinian monk worthy of their attention – until there came a movement that threw the whole continent into turmoil. There were more Christians living in Russia, and no country that seemed more durably Christian than Russia, at the time Lenin was born.

Such catastrophes can make us ask if God has forgotten his people, abandoned his Church. But such downfalls always occur when God remembers our sins and visits us with chastisement! His purpose is always to make us remember again what it is to which we have been called: Faith and Worship in the name and grace of Christ; Prayer and holy living in daily life; Generous compassion to all in need, especially each other; and the Proclamation of our Lord to the nations of the world.

These are the fruits of righteousness that God seeks to grow and harvest from his Church in the world! And he will have his vineyard. This is the power of the Gospel in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. God will have his vineyard; the Kingdom of Heaven will flourish on the earth, and now til the Last Day it will grow under the name of Jesus Christ.

But no group of Christians is guaranteed the franchise. No church dare ignore the words of Christ:

“He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”

There is no denomination, certainly no synod, no congregation that God needs to redeem the world. He shall always have servants to proclaim the Gospel promise, and to bestow his saving sacraments faithfully. In this place or that, who will be doing this work one year from now, ten years from now, or a century from now? Those who are faithful. A material building ensures nothing. No parish history, no name like “Lutheran,” ensures anything. Only one thing does, and it is so crucial that our Lord must switch metaphors.

Notice, then, how our Lord suddenly switches from an agrarian parable to a different one, an old metaphor favored by Israel’s prophets:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

Christ and his power to save alone ensure the Kingdom of God, for which he will find servants who are faithful. Those who lead the Church bear a special burden of fidelity to God’s Word, for the public teaching of God’s Word shall be lead to God’s people living holy lives according to it. How sad that...

The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them...

For had the scribes and the Pharisees only realized that it was not their church – that they were stewards of the Vineyard of God – what glory they would have inherited in the Kingdom of God under the Christ!

We pray God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, for the teaching of his Word in its truth and purity, and for our lives to be lives of love lived from faith and hope, to his glory and for the benefit of our neighbor. Thus may we still be revealed, and serve him faithfully, as the vineyard of his choosing and care. ☩