

EVENING PRAYER ZOOM: 28 MARCH 2021: ISAIAH 5.1-7, MARK 12. 1-12

Setting up a vineyard is a long-term investment.

I once met a man who was establishing a vineyard in South America. He said: “For the first 5 years, cash flow is all one way – out” . As it happened, his vineyard produced excellent wine and he sold it at a good profit to a large multi-national wine company. So he was a happy investor.

But the investor in Isaiah 5 was not so happy.

He had set up his vineyard on a favourable slope;
he had planted vines from good stock; he had put in machinery to make the wine;
he had fenced it to keep out marauding animals;
he had built a watchtower to keep out marauding human trespassers.

But it only produced worthless fruit.

As he said – what more could I have done?

In exasperation, he cut his losses and abandoned the vineyard, which became desolate.

In case his readers don't get the point, the prophet makes it clear in verse 7. God is the farmer; the nation of Israel is the vineyard.

He had set them in a good place, a land flowing with milk and honey, and wine, and he had protected them from natural and manmade dangers. God had hoped for justice and righteousness; he saw only greed and oppression. He will abandon them to their fate.

Jesus knew this passage, a rare example of an Old Testament parable, and his reference to watchtower and fence and machinery points to its reworking as a New Testament parable – the difference being that there is nothing wrong with the vineyard, it is the tenants who are the problem. They get violent with the owner's servants, and then kill his son.

Not surprisingly, the owner evicts them and installs new tenants.

The chief priest, scribes and elders, who are probably the “they” in verse 12, assume Jesus is aiming at them, and plot their revenge.

Mark’s first readers will also read in it that Jesus means that God will evict those chief priests, scribes and elders and install the church instead.

This has led to the doctrine of supersession – though I am sure the early church never used the word – namely that the church has totally superseded the old religion that Jesus grew up in.

Wait a minute though. Jesus did not usually explain his parables, and he did not explain this one.

The chief priests and scribes and elders of the Temple in Jerusalem heard the parable and assumed it was aimed at them. But the parables are not time limited and the chief priests and scribes and elders of the new religion ought to listen and wonder if it is also aimed at them - that is, at us.

When God sends to ask us to account for the fruits of the vineyard we occupy, when God asks us for what is due to him, do we respond honestly and graciously and generously? Or do we get defensive and annoyed and blame the messengers?

That is a less comfortable thought.