

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We're a week away from Holy Week when liturgical time slows down, and we walk with Jesus in real time to the cross and grave. Next Sunday, we will welcome Him into Jerusalem with palm branches in hand, singing our "*hosannas*" to "*the son of David.*" "*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord*" (Luke 19:38). Next Sunday we will read the passion account from St. Luke and the events especially of Thursday and Friday. Thursday, we'll think on the New Testament Jesus gives to His church. Friday, we'll join the brave women and the beloved disciple as witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

Holy Week is part of Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent. We enter Passiontide today. Truly, we always preach the offensive and foolish message of "*Christ crucified,*" "*Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1 Cor. 1:23-24), but especially during Passiontide do we ponder Jesus' cross. And we experience the liturgical changes that accompany it: blood scarlet on the altar, crosses veiled, the omission of the Gloria Patris. In this way, we ramp up our sober reflection on Jesus' passion and death.

Lest today you feel a bit of chronological unease, you need to know that in today's Gospel, Jesus is already in Jerusalem. What we celebrate on Palm Sunday — Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem — has already happened (Luke 19:28ff). He has wept over the unbelief of Jerusalem and prophesied its destruction (Luke 19:41ff). He has cleared the temple of those who were making it a "*den of robbers*" and overturned their tables (Luke 19:45-46). He has been teaching in the temple, and the people "*were hanging on His words*" (Luke 19:48). The people loved Him, but the religious leaders didn't; and they were seeking ways "*to destroy Him*" (Luke 19:47). The leaders questioned Jesus and His authority, seeking somehow to discredit Him and in that way to destroy Him, but Jesus was having none of it: You won't answer my question about John's baptism? "*Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things*" (Luke 20:8).

That's when Jesus turned back to the people and began again to teach them — the chief priests and scribes listening in, of course. Jesus told a parable, and Luke tells us these religious leaders heard Him and "*perceived that he had told this parable against them.*" The people were horrified by what they heard. The leaders became even more determined to kill Jesus, but by stealth for fear of the people. They determined to deliver Jesus over to the Romans to carry out His execution (Luke 20:19-20).

So this was the context in which Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants. And surely this was a "ramping up" of Jesus' teaching of what had to be. Last week, remember, Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal son. Reminding us that

Jesus came to welcome sinners and eat with them, He told of the younger son who returned in repentance, and who was welcomed by the Jesus figure in the parable. You'll recall there was also an elder son in that parable representing the Jewish leaders. This son rejected the father's entreaties to join in the celebration. And that's where Jesus left the parable — without resolution.

“What happens next?”, we wonder? In my sermon last Sunday, I told you what the elder son didn't do — he didn't join the feast ... ever. But what did he do? In a conversation last Sunday after Mike's concert, an answer was suggested, and it's clear to me that it was right. Remembering that the elder son represented the Pharisees, and the father represented Jesus, the inescapable and maybe shocking end of that parable is that the elder son killed his father.

But now as Jesus has entered Jerusalem to offer Himself up as the sacrifice for our sin, He doesn't hold back as He tells another parable. And in this one, He goes all the way to the climax: *“they threw [the heir — the beloved Son] out of the vineyard and killed him.”*

*“A man planted a vineyard,”* Jesus began. The figure of a vineyard would have been familiar to the people, especially the religious leaders. They surely knew the Lord's song of the vineyard recorded by the prophet Isaiah: *“My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes”* (Isa. 5:1-2). These words may sound familiar to you too; we use them on Good Friday.

The prophet tells us what the vineyard is: *“For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry”* (Isa. 5:7).

In Jesus' parable, the tenants, who mistreated the servants sent to them, represent the religious authorities, who did as Jesus had lamented earlier: they *“[killed] the prophets and [stoned] those who are sent to it”* (Luke 13:34). History bears witness. Israel mistreated the prophets God had sent to her, and the final one, John the Baptist, had lost his head.

The Lord of the vineyard, God the Father, asked, *“What shall I do?”* (v. 13) The chief priests and scribes surely were drawn again to the song in Isaiah: *“What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it”* (Isa. 5:4)? The Father answered His own question: *“I will send my beloved son,”* He said. *“Perhaps they will respect Him.”* But the tenants rejected him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him, thinking they might receive the inheritance. How foolish! *“[The owner] will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.”*

The parable is not difficult; we understand: the son is Jesus. Jesus is the One cast out of the city gates and killed. The people don't want to hear it. "*May it never be!*" But all these things had to be, according to Scripture: "*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*" Indeed, on this Rock, upon Himself, the Crucified, Jesus builds His church.

For, on the one hand, Jesus is speaking this parable to Israel and the religious leaders of His day, those who rejected God's salvation promise through the Messiah, and wanted to rely on their own righteousness. Repentance and faith is the fruit God looks for, but their works were wild grapes. That's how St. Paul explains it: "*Israel ... did not succeed in reaching [the law that leads to righteousness]. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone*" (Rom. 9:31-32).

On the other hand, Jesus wasn't just talking to them, but to all people, even today, who reject the message of the prophets, that salvation belongs to our God, and to His Christ. It is spoken today to all who think that the wild grapes of politics, current events, environment, morality, social justice, identity, or prosperity will lead them to righteousness. When we reject the prophetic and apostolic message of Christ, the cornerstone on which His church is built — when we reject the message of the cross — then "*the stone that the builders rejected ... falls on us,*" too, and "*it will crush us.*"

Oh, what a stumbling block is this truly Christian message: our salvation is found only in the Son, no one else (Acts 4:12); our salvation is found only in His cross, not human wisdom or strength (1 Cor. 1:22-25); our salvation is found only in His grace, through faith, not in our works (Eph. 2:8-9). Our salvation is only found in the incredible love of the Father, the owner of the vineyard, who sent His beloved Son to wretched sinners, knowing that He would be treated shamefully, cast out, and killed, but having determined that by His suffering and by His death He would accomplish the world's salvation. For that's how God loved the world: by giving His beloved Son and lifting Him up unto death for the sins of the world (John 3:14-16).

God grant us in this Passiontide that this Stone may not fall on us and crush us, but rather that we may fall on it in repentance, that our own pride may be broken in pieces, for God will not despise our broken spirits and contrite hearts (Ps. 51:17). And God grant that we may continue to fall in faith upon this Stone at His table today, that we may be strengthened in that faith as we "*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.