

In the name of ✠ Jesus. Amen.

You can be forgiven if you think that today's Gospel lesson with Jesus' telling of another parable takes place as Jesus is making His way to Jerusalem — like last Sunday's Parable of the Prodigal Son. After all, liturgically speaking, we have not yet welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem; we have not waved our palm branches or sung our "*hosannas*" to "*the son of David.*" "*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord*" (Luke 19:38). That's next Sunday.

And don't fret it. Our liturgical readings don't have to be historically chronological, much like we heard yesterday that artists don't always seek to depict events historically, but devotionally. And so, just as artists "speak" to us theologically by their art as they juxtapose different Biblical images into one work, so our lectionary readings can make theological points, even if they aren't presented to us chronologically.

Therefore today, as we begin Passiontide, with blood scarlet on the altar and crosses veiled, with the omission of the Gloria Patri's, Jesus is already in Jerusalem. He had made His triumphal entry therein (Luke 19:28ff). He had wept over the unbelief of Jerusalem and prophesied its destruction (Luke 19:41ff). He had cleared the temple of those who were making it a "*den of robbers*" and overturned their tables (Luke 19:45-46). He was teaching in the temple, and the people "*were hanging on His words*" (Luke 19:48). They loved Him, but the religious leaders didn't; and they were seeking ways "*to destroy Him*" (Luke 19:47). These 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).

So Jesus turned again to the people and began again to teach them—always within the earshot of the chief priests and scribes, of course. Jesus told a parable, and Luke tells us they heard Him and "*perceived that he had told this parable against them.*" Indeed, we might say that Jesus was "*speaking truth to power.*" That is, He spoke hard truths to the people, especially the religious authorities, at His peril. And we know the result: at the end of the week Jesus was arrested and put to death, even as He predicted in this parable.

Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants. And truthfully, it's not too difficult to understand. We get it. The chief priests and scribes especially got it. The figure of a vineyard was a familiar metaphor in the Old Testament. They 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). If these words sound familiar to you, too, think Good Friday.

Indeed, the song 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). As Jesus was telling His parable, these words would have been ringing in the scribe's ears.

Now 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).

The owner of the vineyard, God the Father, asked, *“What shall I do”* (v. 13)? He had sent the prophets, and the final one, John the Baptist, had lost his head. 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! Rather *“[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, 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 works. That's how St. Paul explains it: *“Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. 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, not just they stumble over this stone. Jesus is speaking to all those throughout the years, including those today, who reject the message of the prophets, that salvation belongs to our God, and to His Christ. It is spoken today to all of us today who set aside the message of David's righteous Branch, a king sent to deal wisely, who will *“execute justice and righteousness,”* who will be called *“The LORD is our righteousness”* (Jer. 23:5-6). It is spoken to all who reject the

Gospel message for other messages: politics, current events, environment, morality, social justice, identity, prosperity. 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*”, too.

Surely, if anyone could attain righteousness on his own, apart from Christ crucified, it was St. Paul, who “*as to righteousness of the law, [was] blameless,*” whose pedigree was impeccable: “*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church.*” Yet he took no consolation from these. Rather, all this he “*counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*” All this he “*counted ... as rubbish.*” For the righteousness of God comes not by our own striving “*from the law.*” It comes through faith in Christ the crucified. The righteousness of God depends on faith in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile.

So that Paul again reminds us, “*Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith*” (Rom. 9:30).

Oh what a stumbling block is this truly Christian message: our salvation is found only in the Son, no one else; our salvation is found only in His cross, not human wisdom or strength; our salvation is found only in His grace, through faith, not in our works. 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 subjecting Him to death as the propitiation of the sins of the world.

God grant 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 does not despise our broken spirits and contrite hearts (Ps. 51:17), but welcomes us into His kingdom by the water that washes us clean and creates in us clean hearts and right spirits. And He invites us to fall upon Him at His table today, that we may be strengthened in our faith as we “*press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” God grant it as we enter this Passiontide, and indeed, always.

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