



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you found yourself excluded. What happened, and how did it make you feel?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

Generous and persistent God,
who never gives up on us even when we get it wrong,
we bring our thanks and praises to you this day,
knowing we can place our trust in you without hesitation.
You reveal your inexhaustible creativity in the world,
your infinite love in the life, death and rising of your Son,
and your irrepressible hope in the Spirit's whirlwind breath.

As we worship you today, fill our hearts with gladness,
and may the words on our lips be of praise and joy.
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 80:7 – 15

Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.
**Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?**
The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.
**Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven,
and see; have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand planted.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of renewal and refreshment,
we bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of the world we share
in need of transformation and fresh hope.

For the times when we've sought to exclude others from your Kingdom, and failed to put love into practice:

God of mercy, forgive us.

For the times when we've been made unwelcome by others, simply for being who you made us to be:

God of love, comfort us.

For the times when we've rejected our share in the Kingdom, excluding ourselves by failing to yield fruit:

God of liberation, free us.

For the times when we've turned a blind eye to the exclusion of others and the injustices in our world:

God of justice, convict us.

For the times when we've struggled to live out the Gospel of Christ, and erected boundaries around your love:

God of courage, renew us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of renewal and refreshment,
transform us, and send us out to bear good fruit.
Amen

Reading Matthew 21:33 – 46

Sermon

I've heard it said that there is a pretty fine line between comedy and tragedy, and that they are two sides of the same coin. Shakespeare was a master of the art of exposing this aspect of human experience and I've found that real life frequently is like that, leaving one unsure about whether to laugh or cry, or both! Today's parable was told by Jesus in a situation that was deadly serious. He was teaching in the

courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem, having arrived into the city in spectacular fashion on Palm Sunday, with adoring crowds cheering him quite literally from the rooftops. He caused chaos by overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and driving them out of that same courtyard, prompting the Chief Priests and the Elders to take action when he returned the next day to teach, and drew large numbers to him. With the Festival of Passover bringing thousands of pilgrims to an already overcrowded city and feelings of resentment against the ruling Roman authorities running high, they were worried. Any signs of trouble could cause Pontius Pilate – the Roman governor, in town to ensure that order was kept during the celebrations – to strip them of what limited power they were permitted by Rome to wield. Hence, they went to confront Jesus, demanding to know by whose authority he was doing all these things (Matthew 21:23).

The Parable of the Vineyard Owner was the second in a set of three which Jesus told in response to them, following on from the Parable of the Two Sons (Matthew 21:28 – 32), which pulled no punches in highlighting how the very people who were meant to represent God to the nation of Israel, and vice versa, were failing to do the work of God's Kingdom. Next week, we will hear the Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1 – 14), but for now, let's dive into today's text and witness Jesus the master storyteller at work.

The Parable of the Vineyard Owner would have been familiar to the first hearers of it, on at least three levels. It drew on a common motif used by many Rabbis at the time – that of a vineyard and its workers – and described routine business practices in the Roman Empire. It was quite normal for landowners to be 'absentee landlords', renting their vineyards out to tenant vinedressers in return for a share of the produce, and the tensions that could sometimes result made for rich storytelling fodder for many a Rabbinic teacher. However, there was another level upon which Jesus's tale worked, that the Chief Priests and Elders would have instantly recognised. Those opening details

about fences, presses and watchtowers clearly echoed the prophet Isaiah's *Song of the Vineyard*, which was a love poem between God and Israel (Isaiah 5:1 – 7). God laments the sour grapes of injustice, produced by the vineyard (which signifies the nation) despite all that care and love lavished on them. Various interpretations of this song had directed their fire squarely at the Temple establishment, so I've no doubt they had a sense of where Jesus was going with this when he began in the exact same way. With the addition of some tenants, and of the owner's son, it makes for a stinging rebuke.

Notice how the owner of this vineyard is the eternal optimist! Having seen two sets of slaves killed by the tenants, he expects that honour will be upheld and that they will respect his son, as the heir apparent (Matthew 21:37). Notice also how the grasping tenants hatch a plan with no chance whatsoever of working, as they aim to steal the birth right of the son (Matthew 21:38). It is both comic and tragic, but also rather weird if you think about it. Something deeper is going on here than might be first apparent on the surface. It isn't clear whether it's the crowds or the authorities who respond to that rhetorical question about how this hapless owner should react to the murder of his son, but we do know the quotation Jesus answers them with comes from Psalm 118:22 – 23. It isn't obvious in English, but the words for 'the stone' (*haeben*) and 'the son' (*haben*) in Hebrew are similar, making sense of Jesus apparently jumping from vineyards to cornerstones. The Targum was an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures, and in that, the stone was identified with King David, in whose lineage Jesus stood. Combined with Matthew's swapping around the details of the son's demise (21:39) from the order of the equivalent story in Mark (12:1 – 12), to mirror Jesus's eventual fate, it seems clear that this parable points towards his own death a few days later.

Now, I do not want to argue with that interpretation – it makes sense – but I think there is something else going on here at the same time. Jesus telling the Temple authorities that the Kingdom of God would

be taken from them was not so much a *threat* as a *statement of fact*. The odd behaviour of landowner and tenants alike holds the key, in that the vineyard owner continuing to send further messengers, and the stubborn tenants acting against their own best interests, mirrors the interaction between Jesus and the religious authorities. He was not interested in keeping score or excluding them from the Kingdom so much as keeping trying to draw them in despite their refusals. In essence, by falling into the same trap as Israel in Isaiah's time, and failing to yield fruits of justice, they were excluding *themselves* from the Kingdom of God.

Friends, are we doing that same thing, and self-excluding ourselves from the Kingdom of God? When we don't live as the people we are made to be and as God knows us to be, maybe that's self-exclusion and, therefore, maybe that's why we need God to keep reaching out to us like Jesus did with the Temple authorities. What does this look like in practice? Well, to borrow a few thoughts from Michael Marsh, and his commentary upon this passage, examples of self-exclusion might include things like:

- Perfectionism and constant self-condemnation;
- Always needing to be in control and have all of the answers;
- Bearing grudges and harbouring resentments;
- Clinging onto guilt and believing oneself to be unforgiveable;
- Dodging the hard work of reconciliation in favour of revenge;
- Going on autopilot and never truly showing up when praying.

So, how is this good news? Well, for me, the good news lies in God refusing to give up on people like you and me, and keeping reaching out to us, even when we push God away or go against our own best interests. Jesus did not reject the Priests and Elders (which included some Pharisees), even though they struggled to accept the ways in which he was redefining what it meant to belong to God's Kingdom, by breaking down barriers of exclusion and injustices. We too might

struggle with the seemingly comical grace of God that keeps coming back even we fail to bear fruit, or when we find ourselves looking at others in judgmental ways. However, the good news is that the love which led Jesus to the cross is always there for you and for me, and we cannot do anything to make God love us any less. We can hence find a security in God which the world cannot offer, because it really is true that God's grace is without end. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Good Will Hunting (1997) is a really powerful film about a self-taught maths genius who, with the help of his mentor, gradually overcomes the self-exclusionary mindset and behaviour which had stopped him fulfilling his huge potential. It is a story about redemption and hope.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing