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Tenants and Heirs (Matthew 21: 33-46)

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We are moving towards the end of the church's year, which means the lectionary is focusing on stories from the last stages of Jesus' teaching ministry, the period when things start to come to a head. Indeed, in this section of Matthew's gospel, there's a sense of crisis building. Jesus is back in Jerusalem and embarked on a series of tense exchanges with the religious establishment. It's as if he's actively seeking to provoke them into making a decision for or against him and his vision of God.

Those of you who came to theologian James Alison's lecture the week before last will recognize the reading we've just had.¹ It constitutes part of Jesus' reply to the demand of the priests and elders in Jerusalem that he give an account of why he should be taken seriously. And given the magnitude of what he's claiming this, as Alison said, is quite a reasonable demand. So let's get a bit more sense of this context, so as (with Alison's help) to have a go at unpacking Jesus' reply.

The day before he tells this parable, Jesus has made his mock triumphant entry into Jerusalem mounted (according to Matthew) 'on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (21: 5). This, as the gospel takes pains to point out, deliberately fulfils the prophecy of Zechariah concerning the coming of Israel's true king, the heir of David. The people who line the streets waving palm branches seem perfectly aware that this is what Jesus is doing, greeting him with the words 'Hosanna to the Son of David'; and then Jesus proceeds to enact the cleansing of the temple, thus fulfilling a bunch of other prophecies concerning the restoration of the true Israel in him. So – as Alison brings out

¹ I am indebted to this lecture for much of the interpretation that follows. See also Alison, 'Traversing hostility: The *sine qua non* of any Christian talk about Atonement' [accessed <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng75.html>], 6 October 2017].

– this is all completely deliberate. It’s not (as is sometimes claimed) that Jesus is suddenly overcome by righteous anger at the corruption of the temple. Rather, he’s putting on a ‘performance’, he’s enacting a communication which says, here I am, the Messiah of Israel has come. And the priests and elders understand this is precisely what’s happening. They do not have Jesus arrested for disorderly conduct; instead, when he comes back the following morning, having cursed on his way there a fig tree – a symbol of Israel failing to bear fruit – they ask him ‘by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ (21:23). Tell us, in other words, how we’re to know if you’re for real.

Jesus is now in a tricky position. If he says that he acts by the authority of God, he’s likely to be arrested immediately for blasphemy. If he says he acts by his own authority, he’s likely to be arrested immediately for blasphemy. So, he says, ‘I will also ask you one question’ – if you answer me, I’ll answer you. Here it comes: ‘Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ Notice what Jesus does here. He puts the chief priests in the same double bind by which they’ve attempted to snare him: they too are now in a tricky position. They argued with one another, ‘If we say [that the baptism of John] is “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd ... So they answered Jesus, “We do not know”. And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things”.

Now we could read this simply as a slippery conversational move on Jesus’ part, a clever side-stepping of proper responsiveness to a legitimate question. Alison suggests a different reading. It’s not that Jesus is avoiding the question they pose concerning his authority, but he’s refusing the terms in which they seek an answer. Why? Because these terms aren’t going to get them anywhere – whatever he says, they’ll be justified in being scandalized by him and they won’t be helped to understand what he’s bringing about. So Jesus, having stumped them, proceeds to re-engage them. And he begins to tell a series of parables, of which the one we just heard is the second. The word para-

balo in Greek means literally 'to throw beside'. So telling a parable is an invitation to see something by means of something else. It offers a new angle or lens. And that's what Jesus now offers his interlocutors.

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. Immediately, the scene evokes Isaiah's image of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah as a vineyard planted by God. This landowner put a fence around the vineyard, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower; in other words, he took every possible care to create a vineyard capable of bearing fruit, and then he went away and leased it to tenants. Tenants, it turns out, from hell, who refused to hand over the landowner's share of the fruit at harvest time, beat up his emissaries and ultimately murdered even his son. 'What will the landowner do to those tenants?', asks Jesus. Say the chief priests, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time'.

Now, when you think about it, their confident condemnation of the tenants is a little strange, given that the image of the vineyard so directly references the people of Israel. Alison comments that Jesus' 'listeners are either incapable ... or unwilling to accept the implicit challenge, by entering inside the story and seeing themselves as the murderous tenants'. They choose to remain on the outside of the analogy and to exercise 'an entirely retributory logic of righteous innocence'. It's as if they're assuming: 'We would never do anything like that, and anyone who does something like that should have meted out to them the same violence they had themselves meted out'.²

So here comes the subtle bit. Jesus responds by ignoring what they just said, and quoting from Psalm 118, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? I don't know about you, but I've tended to hear this response of Jesus as though he's agreeing with the Pharisees' condemnation. Yes, you're right, the

² Alison, 'Traversing hostility'.

tenants deserve what's coming to them, but meanwhile the son who is killed, the stone that is rejected will become the cornerstone. The only thing the Pharisees get wrong is that they don't realise they're the murderous ones and so they're the ones from whom the vineyard will be taken away. It's kind of like they miss the irony. But their logic of reward and punishment remains intact – this is how God is going to be towards those murderous tenants.

Alison argues differently. Jesus's response, he says, reveals that it's not the killing of the son that's the primary focus of the landowner. His quotation from Psalm 118 takes for granted that there will be a rejection, that David (who wrote the psalm) expected his heir to be rejected and that the priests (who are supposed to understand their own Scriptures) should recognize this dynamic when it starts to take place. In other words, if you think of the murderous tenants representing Israel, the prophetic expectation is that Israel will reject the coming of the true owner, the heir of the vineyard, the Messiah. So what's interesting is what the landowner who is Lord does about that rejection. The priests assume a logic of retribution; but Jesus focuses on how the Lord is able to bring from this rejection, from this murder something entirely new, something founded on the one who has been rejected.

The problem for those interrogating Jesus is that they'll never get on the inside of this new thing, unless they can begin to acknowledge *their* hostility, their murderous inclinations, unless they can give up the certainty of their own innocence and righteousness. With astonishing deliberation Jesus is coming towards them, and is asking them to see themselves, along with the whole system they're part of, as a kind of rebellious tenancy, a vineyard that's withholding the fruit it's been created to bear. He's asking them to see that their refusal of John the Baptist, their suspicion of him and their insistence on the logic of retribution are all part of that same rebellion, that withholding. Unless they can begin to see themselves this way, they'll be unable to recognize that Jesus is indeed the heir of David in the process of being rejected and that his authority is from God. Dimly, they perceive something of what he's saying – 'they

realized he was speaking about them'. But they didn't like it – and were stopped from arresting him then and there only because they feared the crowds.

This is a complex passage. It has Jesus speaking in terms largely foreign to us. But here's my take home. God is interested not in reward, not in punishment, but in fruitfulness. And fruitfulness becomes possible because Jesus has come towards us, has (in Alison's words) 'traversed our hostility' and created space for us to acknowledge the truth of ourselves and what we're caught up in, warts and all, our hidden resentments and knee-jerk defensiveness, as well as our deepest desires and yearnings. Fruitfulness becomes possible as we let ourselves be seen and discover ourselves accepted despite everything, invited to found our lives in this Jesus coming towards us, to participate in what the Lord is doing, and discovering that it is amazing in our eyes.