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### **From Grasping to Self-Dispossession (Matthew 21.33-46)**

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‘Listen to another parable’, Jesus says. This part of Matthew’s gospel is bristling with them. As though he’s desperately trying to get across a whole new way of looking at things – ‘see it like this’, ‘consider it from this perspective’. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like ... may be compared to ... A man had two sons ... A king held a wedding banquet ... A landowner planted a vineyard ...’. Are you getting the gist? These brilliant little stories touch on many things. They speak of Jesus’ understanding of the nature of God, and so the nature of true worship and conversion. His hearers’ reaction to the parables – how they locate themselves in the story – is part of what helps them, helps us, to see ourselves more clearly. For the last couple of weeks, we’ve been exploring what these parables illuminate about basic features of human nature. And, because it’s the Season of Creation, we’ve been reflecting on how our relationship with our own nature affects our care for and connection with the natural world. Tonight, in the last of this series, we come to what’s known as the ‘parable of the wicked tenants’.

As we saw last week, Jesus is in the midst of an extended dialogue with the religious authorities – a dialogue provoked by his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his deliberate performance of a series of signs that constitute his claim to be Israel’s Messiah and Lord. The chief priests and scribes are deeply concerned about all this. They seek to test his legitimacy, to determine the basis of his authority. While Jesus, on the other hand, is deeply concerned to get them to see their own blindspots – how although they claim to represent and enable access to God, they are in fact in the process of rejecting God’s presence and word.

And so, he tells them another parable. ‘There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then

he leased it to tenants and went to another country' (Matthew 21.33). Stanley Hauerwas suggests that this parable 'can serve as an outline of Matthew's understanding of the life of Israel. God called Israel to be his vineyard fenced by the law, grounded [or perhaps, fruitful] in the land, and protected by worship of God in the temple'.<sup>1</sup> The problem is that when the landowner of the parable sends his servants to collect his produce, the tenants seize them all, beating, killing and stoning them. The landowner tries again, sending yet more representatives, and the tenants treat them in the same way. 'Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son"' (21.37). But, in fact, the son turned out to be just as vulnerable. With his advent, not only do the tenants refuse to hand over the landowner's produce, but they see their opportunity to usurp the rightful heir altogether – to seize possession of the vineyard for themselves: 'come, let us kill him and get his inheritance'.

For Matthew's community, the Christological resonance of this parable is unmistakable. Jesus depicts himself as the culmination of all those teachers and prophets sent by God to demand of Israel the fruits of its faith, knowing that he, the 'son', will also be refused and murdered. The question he puts to his hearers, then, entices the religious authorities effectively to pass judgement on themselves: "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time"' (21.40-41). And only later do they realise what they've conceded. It's a denouement very like the one in the story told by the prophet Nathan in the book of Samuel, where King David is enticed to express his outrage at the injustice perpetrated by a 'certain rich man', only to be told by Nathan, 'You are that man' (2 Sam. 12.7).

I want to draw out a couple of things to begin. It's worth acknowledging that this parable has had a troubling legacy. In part, the writer of Matthew's gospel is working through issues to do with God's relationship with Israel. He's trying to make

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p.186.

sense of the fact that though Jesus claims to be Israel's Messiah, the fulfilment of the Jewish law and prophets, he is not recognized as such by the designated authorities. And this raised the question for the early church of whether God's election of Israel has been superseded. Whether, in the words attributed to Jesus in this story, 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you [Jews] and given to a people [Christians] that produces the fruits of the kingdom'? (21.43) That's certainly been one Christian interpretation of these verses, and it's given rise at times to the most appalling anti-semitism. But this 'supersessionist' view is, in the end, rejected by the New Testament itself. St Paul too wrestles with this theme, but comes finally to the view that Jesus' rejection by the religious authorities at that time was actually part of the divine plan, part of what makes salvation available to the Gentiles. And this means, Paul insists, that in no way has 'God ... rejected his people [Israel]' (Romans 11.1), for 'the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable' (11.29).

In this regard, it seems significant that when the chief priests and scribes speak so harshly of the punishment deserved by the wicked tenants in our parable, Jesus doesn't directly endorse their words. Rather, it's at this very point that he begins to give them a clue that they might be in the process of being hoist on their own petard. They've just energetically condemned the tenants of the story for casting out and killing the landowner's son. Jesus responds by making them present to their contemporary involvement in exactly this dynamic of rejection. Awareness begins to dawn: 'they realized that he was speaking about them'. But they're not ready to accept the implications of the analogy. And with one of those exquisite bits of Scriptural irony, they carry on looking for a way to get rid of him.

This, then, is a parable that speaks in a particular way to the context in which it was told. Yet it speaks also, I think, to our human nature in general. For what comes through again and again is the impulse of the 'wicked' tenants to take possession, to seize what does not ultimately belong to them. They assume exclusive ownership of the harvest and withhold it from the landowner, though he has provided the means of its production; then they seize two iterations of the

landowners' servants and finally, says the text, 'they seized' the son. This habit of seizure, the desire to possess things on our own terms, is a deeply human trait. And it's understandable. For about twenty years of my adult life, I was a tenant. I lived in a variety of rental accommodation, as a student, in group houses and on my own. When I finally bought a flat, what came with the sense of 'ownership' was surprising. I hadn't been aware of feeling insecure before, or of wanting to accumulate property – but suddenly I felt a new sense of home and belonging. It felt good to be no longer dependent the vagaries of a landlord's responsiveness and care, subject to the dreaded periodic inspections; it felt good to be able to pour more of myself into a place, knowing my situation was more permanent. The impulse to own, to belong somewhere, is not in and of itself 'wicked'.

But there is a question of *what* we seek to 'own' and *how* we act as custodians of what's given us to possess. If the vineyard in the parable represents God's gift of life to Israel, Jesus is reminding the authorities they can't seize this gift exclusively for themselves – as if they could produce its promised fruit apart from responsiveness to the giver. In the same way, if in the end everything is gift – plants and animals, land, sea and sky, our own lives and the lives of those we share them with – if everything is 'leased to us' (for we did not generate it and cannot preserve it), then the parable suggests that neither ought we seize these things exclusively for ourselves. All human 'ownership', all possession, is provisional and when we forget this, when some of us arrogantly abrogate to ourselves and our small-minded purposes what does not ultimately belong to us, we end up dispossessing others and violating the earth. Just ask the indigenous peoples of the world, who are those most recently dispossessed of their inheritance, cast out and killed by a veritable bevy of wicked colonial tenants.

The implications of the grasping tendencies in human nature for our ecological crisis are obvious. The vineyard of the earth is in the process of being ever more completely and illegitimately seized by the corporate and self-serving interests of a few – not only land, sea and forests, but the DNA of plants and seeds, the

minerals in the Antarctic and in space, the fresh water systems on which all life relies. These are gifts for the common good. By what authority are they doing these things? Such seizure and exploitation looks superficially powerful – it looks like control. But in the end, it is premised upon theft and leads to destruction.

Jesus shows us what it looks like to be human in the world in a totally different spirit. Not grasping, but self-giving; not self-serving, but responsive to the gift and the Giver of Life. To the powers of this world, he seems vulnerable, weak, easily cast aside. But this stone, rejected by human builders, turns out to be the cornerstone of creation. His way of being reflects the pattern and is the meaning of the world God has made. To be aligned with his self-dispossessing nature is find our right relationship to everything, and enable the well-being of all. To reject this pattern is to conspire in our own and the world's ruin; 'the one who falls on this stone', Jesus says – who is not aligned to it – 'will be broken to pieces' (Matthew 21.44).

We have been exploring features of human nature and how our relationship to our own nature affects our connection with and care for the natural world. There is that within us which tends to destruction. Yet the parables of Jesus reveal what we may yet be – the possibility of our humanity transfigured by his example and grace from envy to generosity, from self-deception to humility and from grasping to self-dispossession. The call of discipleship is that we learn to be human as he is human – as Paul puts it, 'all of us being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3.18). For love of the world, let us pray it may be so.