

Sermon: 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 21:33-46 – The Parable of the Tenants

Theme: Faithfulness in God's vineyard

Goal: We shall be faithful as God's workers in His Kingdom

Dear Friends,

**Introduction:** This is the third parable we have preached about recently based on the example of a vineyard. Renting a vineyard was a very common practice in Jesus' time. So people could understand this teaching well. And this was a well known picture of the church as well, as we read in the Psalm 80 and in the Old Testament Lesson for today, Isaiah 5. There was no doubt about what Jesus was teaching, and “the chief priest and the Pharisees knew He was talking about them”.

The beautiful part of that parable is its beginning: “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a vine press in it and built a watchtower.” Everything was done by the owner, by God. We know that the church was built up by God. She doesn't have a human foundation. The church still exists by God' grace, and He forwarded her to us to work in her and to enjoy her blessings. Everything is ready. What God expects from us is to be faithful to Him and to His purposes, working in His property, taking care of it properly, and bringing back to Him the fruits; this means: our good works according to His will.

But now, the problems begin:

## **I – In the Old Testament and in the New Testament time**

The first ones to whom the vineyard was rented out were the Jews. But they were not always faithful to the landowner. Several times they took over the vineyard, as if they were the owners. And they didn't render to the owner. On the contrary, they didn't accept the owner's representatives,

and they “seized His servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third”. And this happened several times, till they killed the Son of the Owner, Jesus Himself.

God was always patient with His people and with their leaders, sending prophets all the time. The Old Testament has a long list of prophets, and many of them were not accepted by the kings and the church- leaders. The prophets were calling the leaders and people to repentance, looking for fruits and faithfulness; but the people and their leaders were serving other gods. Many prophets were despised and killed. The last one of the Old Covenant was John the Baptist; and the first one of the New Covenant was Stephan, who accused his opposition just before he was stoned: “You always resist to the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him - you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:52)

Jesus accused the chief priest and the Pharisees in Matthew 23: 33-37: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”

And the story continues when Paul and the other apostles went to the towns and cities to preach the Gospel of Jesus. They were always persecuted by the Jews, beaten and stoned, and eventually killed.

The Parable told by Jesus is not something that Jesus invented; but it was

a real report of what had happened and was to happen to Jesus Himself, the Son of the landowner.

The judgment of God came over the unfaithful tenants, as people replied to Jesus' teaching in the Parable: "The owner will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." And Jesus confirms it, saying: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

We read Acts 18:5-6: "When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'"

- And again in Acts 13:46-47: "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you (Jews) first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

## **II – In Luther's time and in our time**

Martin Luther warned the people of his time in Germany: *The Jews were the tenants working in God's vineyard; but they were unfaithful to God and it was taken away from them. Then the Gospel was passed on to the Gentiles in Asia by Paul's ministry, and they were the tenants for a long time; but they became unfaithful as well, and it was taken away from them as well. We have now the Gospel and are God's tenants working in His kingdom. What about us? How long will we be faithful?* (free quotation, by heart) - And we know what is happening to many churches in Europe: They are unfaithful to the Gospel, following their own "theology" and not presenting the fruits to the Owner.- How long will they have the Gospel?

It is our privilege to be tenants in God's vineyard now here in Cape Town and to present Him the fruit of righteousness and justice (Isaiah 5:7). As a preacher wrote recently: *“For it is we – you and I – the ones gathered here, who are the “future” of which Jesus spoke! It was for us that he was crucified and risen from the dead! It was for the sake of a kingdom no longer bounded by geographical lines or genealogical heritage, but by faith engendered by the Spirit in the saving death and resurrection of the One who spoke this parable, that the events following the speaking of this parable took place. For Jesus spoke this parable in the very shadow of the cross – between Palm Sunday and Good Friday -- during the time between the glad acclamations welcoming the Son of David into the Holy City, and the time when the cry “Crucify him” would become the shout with which he was thrown out of the city. There, outside the city gate, death itself would be put to death. There the sin of rejecting this vineyard’s Owner would be atoned for and “other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” would be put in charge of this “vineyard on a very fertile hill.”* (Hubert Beck [hbeck@austin.rr.com](mailto:hbeck@austin.rr.com) -from the Internet).

**Conclusion:** The prayer in the Psalm 80, where the psalmist refers to the people as God's vineyard, is very actual: “Restore us, o God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved...return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine... Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O Lord, God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we might be saved.”

As well as God planted His vineyard out of grace and love, He also preserves it out of grace and love. What we are, what we have, what we are able to do in His vineyard, it is all God's grace in Jesus. He is faithful to His promises and to us as His tenants. We are faithful servants when we present to Him the fruits of thanksgiving and obedience according to His will. Amen.

Carlos Walter Winterle – Cape Town, 02.10.2011