

# *making darkness conscious*

a sermon preached on the

*17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The Lections: Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20, Philippians 3:1-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Today's gospel parable presents the thorny question: will the real God please stand up? If the vineyard owner represents God – which scholars reckon to be the case – then there might appear to be two pictures of God.

The first picture is immediately recognisable. Even though the vineyard owner has been deeply insulted by the outrageous actions of the tenants,<sup>1</sup> he refuses to retaliate. Instead, he sends his son: "They will respect my son".<sup>2</sup> According to middle eastern specialist Biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey, "most Arabic versions of the last thousand years have translated this key phrase literally with *yastahiyun minhu* (they will feel shame in his presence)".<sup>3</sup> So the vineyard owner is relying on middle eastern honour culture – banking on the tenants feeling a sense of shame about their dastardly actions when the son appears among them. Rather than retaliate, then – which the law prescribed – the vineyard owner stays his anger, eschews retaliation and revenge, taking the completely surprising and costly path of vulnerability. In the language of that very early Christian hymn – which we heard last Sunday – he *empties* himself.<sup>4</sup>

This picture of the vineyard owner is immediately recognisable in Jesus the Christ. This is what makes the Christ so attractive to so many, including the likes of Ghandi. However, as Ghandi observed, the Christ is not necessarily observable in Christians – nor in the Christian churches in their collective behaviour.

Perhaps part of the reason Ghandi, and increasing numbers of others, are wary is to be found in the second and very different picture of the vineyard owner which today's text *seems* to suggest. "Now when the owner of the vineyard comes," Jesus asks his listeners, "what will he do those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death..."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the opposite of what the vineyard owner has done – a complete reversal of self-emptying!

However, we can readily see that this second picture of God has profoundly impacted Christianity. Christian infatuation with the 'wrath of God', 'just war' theory, heretic burning, coerced conversions, brutal treatment of various minorities – all reveal its dreadful impact. Reference to the stone which the builders rejected being the stone upon which the baddies fall and are crushed<sup>6</sup> only seems to reinforce this reading of the text. Commentaries on this Matthean parable – even those that highlight the extravagant and gracious action of God as observable in the vineyard owner – tend to end up with the conclusion that, when all's said and done, the parable concludes that God's sense of justice requires retribution, account-settling, lethal violence. This interpretation is widespread. 'God' beating up my enemies is perhaps a function of 'reptilian brain', that postulated millions of years old seat of defensive fight-and-flight, aggression and primal defence.

So not for the first time, I find myself up against the same discomfiting question which many have asked: are these biblical texts safe? Can they be safely read by religious people? Are Christ's disciples subtle enough to see that in the context of today's parable *it's not Jesus who introduces the violent tone*. It's those who are listening to Jesus' teaching who are taken over by their own need for revenge. It's their retributive and lethally violent sense of justice and righteousness – their unacknowledged inner darkness, their 'reptilian brain' perhaps – which is exposed by Jesus' question.

Perhaps that's the point here: the gospel exposes the darkness that lurks unacknowledged within – it sheds light on our propensity towards retaliation and revenge. Shall we invoke our God to call down fire and destroy our enemies?<sup>7</sup> The problem is that this propensity for retaliation and revenge is so clearly and dreadfully revealed not only in the astonishing litany of God's violent deeds in the story of Israel – but, chillingly, in Christian history. Thus, it's almost impossible for us to accept the completely absurd behaviour of the vineyard owner. Let's be honest, self-emptying is a ridiculous idea, utterly unmarketable. Who would

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 21:35-36

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:37

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth E Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008, p419.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:40-41

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 21:44

<sup>7</sup> Luke 9:54-55

buy it! Crucially, the vineyard owner's self-emptying is completely incompatible with prosperity and success ideologies.

This may be the reason why Jesus' picture of God is so often rejected in favour of the picture of God revealed in the crowd. For the god of retributive, lethal retaliation seems to be much more effective in the business of 'growth strategies', empire building, and proselytising.

One of the great challenges of our time is to face up to this dark aspect of the God image which remains so pervasive – this God who, though patient for a time, eventually feels compelled to crush his enemies. This is the God of crusade and jihad alike. This is the God of all religion which claims exclusive rights to the truth and demands absolute power – who, though patient for a time with those who beg to differ, in the end resorts to violence in order to have his way. Little wonder many people in our time wonder whether religion is safe: whether the 'three celestial gentlemen' of the Abrahamic faiths can ever be trusted.

As I reflected further on today's gospel I was struck by the fact that Jesus offers no counterpoint to the crowds' retributive violence. Jesus makes no comment. Why didn't he refute them? Unfortunately, I suspect the textual silence at this point may be dynamite in the churches – subtlety and contextual reading being in short supply. Is the text safe? That is to say, is it safe in the hands of a person whose God is a vengeful account-settling executor of retribution? No, probably not. Regressive tendencies – motivated by fear – are never safe, nor capable of sponsoring on-going creation.

But as anyone who reads the whole of the gospel can see, Jesus *acts out* his response to the crowds' image of God. He does give an answer – and it's very clear. What Jesus does is emphatic, and unambiguous: he rejects all grasping at power, retaliation, violence, and forgoes his rights to justice, freely laying down his life, on the cross. In Jesus an old, regressive image of a violent deity is explicitly rejected – transcended. In Jesus we see that becoming *conscious of his own inner darkness* – his own potential for retribution and lethal violence – enables him to resist unconscious acting out of retribution and violence. "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light," Jung declared, "but by making the darkness conscious".<sup>8</sup> Every Christ disciple – indeed every person, if this planet is to be a safe home for all of us – is called to make our own inner darkness conscious.

Finally, I remind myself that what Incarnation ushers in cannot be halted – no matter how grim matters may at times be. Regressive tendencies will in the end destroy themselves. Perhaps that is what Jesus meant by his reference to the cornerstone?

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