

hard words and a heavy burden

a sermon preached on the
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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah (5:1-7); Ps 80; Philippians (3:4b-14); Matthew (21:33-46)

Matthew's parable of the wicked tenants uses a familiar vineyard metaphor to represent the community in which Jesus lived and to make the point that the so-called leaders of the community, in this example, Pharisees, had killed the prophets and signalled that they were about to kill the Messiah. In the metaphor of the vineyard – the community – the pharisees are the wicked tenants, a tyrannical minority, the slaves are the prophets and the son of the owner is the Son of God. It is relatively straightforward at this level.

If we look a bit more closely at the vineyard metaphor, more is revealed of what is behind Jesus' parable – he presumably uses the vineyard metaphor deliberately, we hear it throughout the bible. The function of a vineyard is to produce fruit that ultimately becomes valuable wine. Jesus make this point, and that the fruit or wine is not to be consumed only by those who work there, but to be shared with others, the vineyard owner in this case. He presses (no pun intended) the metaphor of the vineyard as community, a people who depend on each other to do things together to make the community work.

The reality of a vineyard is that it is a complex place where there are many things to be done, many skills to be employed and the people who work there depend on each other. The jobs include: planting, cultivation, pest control, pruning, picking, irrigation, fertilization, and management, paying the wages, maintaining the equipment. I could go on, but you get the picture. These jobs are done by particular people who have particular skills and they are done in a sequence that is dictated by the way in which vines grow as plants and according to the seasons – they are directed by creation.

For the whole complex arrangement to work, for the grapes and the wine finally to be produced at the best possible yield and of the best quality, requires each person and each function to work together. So, Jesus' metaphor extends more deeply into the complexity of community function. He points out the necessity of people to work together, to cooperate, because they depend on each other. No one person can provide all that she or he needs, no one can live independently of the others.

Likewise, there is a responsibility placed on each person to do the things they are responsible for and in accordance with the sequence of work that the vineyard needs. The irrigation cannot take place while the pruners are pruning, the fertilization must happen before the growing season, the grapes cannot be picked until they are ripe and the manager must pay the staff. No one aspect of the work is independent of the others, no one person can do what he or she wants without regard to the needs of others. No one person is, in reality, in absolute control because all are interdependent.

Extending this logically, if any one person or group of people or one function expects to be in total control to their own benefit or in the interest of a few, excluding of the interests of others, then

the vineyard is no longer a community but a place of tyranny. That is the situation when bullies are allowed to abuse other community members unchecked.

All organisations set some standards of behaviour as we have done in the form of the covenant. The cost of expectation of standards of conduct in a community like this is self-regulation. Of course rules in whatever form only work if people comply. In Matthew Chapter 18 Jesus sets out the responsibility of the members of the church themselves to respond to failure to comply with community standards.

This places a heavy and uncomfortable burden on the majority good hearted people of the community, to stand up to those who do not meet community standards and demand change. This is not our habit though, is it, we don't like the prospect of personal conflict, we don't want to have to make demands of someone, especially if they are abusive, but that is the cost of being in a community like this and enjoying its benefits. The cost of not demanding good behaviour is abuse.

This burden of demanding proper behaviour has to be shared because it is difficult to do. And ultimately, Jesus is quite clear that the failure to meet the standards of the community means rejection. Again, these are hard words to hear and a heavy burden, but how else do you read today's gospel?

There has been a small amount of resistance to the Covenant, a Covenant that was asked for in a parish meeting and provided with the authority of the Parish Council. I want to answer some of these objections. Some say 'I have the bible that I follow'; I say then you should follow it, especially the commandment to love your neighbour and if you love your neighbour, nothing in the Covenant will be a problem for you.

Others say 'People know me, I am a senior member of the congregation'. Well, clearly, we don't know everyone or we would have seen the bullying a long time ago. Or they say, 'this is not an Anglican thing to do'. Yes it is, we make commitments of behaviour all the time, baptismal vows which we renew each year at Easter, marriage vows, and ordination vows. We say what we believe, the creed and the articles of religion and these demand behavioural responses.

Some said 'It is sacrilegious to sign the covenant on the altar – the altar is for God'. Yes the altar is for God and so are our commitments to treat each other properly. Others have said, 'the Vicar should make the same commitment'. Well, I as the locum vicar and a member of the congregation have signed the Covenant and I am bound in the same way as everyone else who has signed it. Furthermore, David and Ken Hewlett and I made this commitment at our ordinations: that we would promote unity, peace and love among all Christian people, especially among those with whom we serve God, encouraging and enabling them to fulfil their ministries. In his induction service David reaffirmed these ordination vows.

These are malicious and divisive quibbles. The Parish Covenant reclaims a vision of this parish community based on gospel of love and justice, that rejects tyranny and control by the few and rejects the abuse they have engaged in. The Covenant is an invitation to join in this a community. Over 110 people have signed the Covenant, the vast majority of the congregation.

It is now time for these good hearted people of this parish to shift their focus to this vision, to rebuilding community both within and among the community outside.

A return to life as we believed it once to be is impossible, but we have a wonderful community and the fabric and resources of this church on which to build. We have the opportunity to embrace change, to support each other, to build community within and to renew our commitment to building community and justice in the wider world.

The responsibility for rebuilding rests with all those of good hearts, everyone. It requires the majority, the good hearted people to refuse tyranny by the few and to take up the responsibility for positive action to make this the loving and just community we all want it to be. I am sure the faith of the majority will prevail and we will make this vineyard a place where fine grapes are grown and harvested, and rare wine is made.