

## PAYING THE RENT

Pentecost 17 Year A (*holiday edition*)

Ex. 20:1-4; Ps. 19; Phil. 3:4b-14; Mt. 21:33-46

Gladstone 04/10/2020

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Two brothers went treat-or-tricking and collected some eggs. The elder said to his younger brother, “I will give you one dollar if you let me break three eggs on your head.” The little boy knew it was going to be a painful experience, but because he needed the dollar he agreed. The bigger boy then went on to break an egg on his brother’s head. His brother took it with an “Ouch!” Then he broke the second egg on his little brother’s head. This time it really hurt and his little brother cried out in pain. But the young lad was determined to get his dollar. So he braced himself for the third and last egg, but his older brother walked away laughing. “Come on, bring on the third egg,” said the little boy. “Nope!” said the bigger brother, “I don’t wanna lose my dollar.”

Now I guess that you could dismiss the story as kids playing pranks—we’ve all done it—but there’s something a little more serious going on here. It is called breach of contract. We’re talking about a sense of responsibility—the recognition that every privilege we enjoy comes with a price tag. Like the big brother in our story, some people go about trying to take advantage of others, of society, and even of God.

I’m sure that you can think of numerous situations where there have been breaches of contract—both on a global scale and at a personal level—both without and within the church—where something has been promised but never delivered.

We see the same thing in the parable of the wicked tenants in today’s gospel passage from Matthew—those who enjoy the benefits that due to them as tenants or managers of the vineyard, yet withhold the benefits that should go to the landowner—the person who owns the property—the rent, so to speak.

We see in this passage, a number of things going on—we learn about issues that relate to our relationship with God and our mission, as Christians—both in a personal sense and corporately as the church. It shouldn’t be too hard for us to see them, because even the Pharisees and the religious leaders got it.

### **1. God’s Patience**

The first thing that we learn from this story is just how incredibly patient God is. This story is really a story about God—a story about his provision and his patience. In the parable, we find that the landowner had invested a lot in the vineyard. We are told that he planted the vineyard, dug a wine press in it, built a watchtower—then he leased it to

tenants and left for another country. In other words, before handing it over and leaving, the owner did everything possible to make the vineyard a going concern—just like anyone who buys a business, sets it up and then leases it out to someone else. He expected his vineyard to produce fruit. He expected a good return for his investment.

The landowner placed a tremendous amount of trust in the tenants—just as God does in us. When it was time to collect the rent—which is the harvest—the master sends representatives, not once, but twice. His patience seems unending. The first group was beaten, stoned, or killed. The second group met the same fate. But the owner was still patient. Finally thinking it inconceivable that his own son would be rejected, he sent him. “They will honour my son,” he says.

However, the wicked tenants failed their final opportunity. In the ultimate test, the son was cast out and killed. An ordinary landlord would have sought revenge on these ungrateful tenants. He might bring a legal action against them or even armed forces to claim what is rightfully his. But this landowner is like God, not like us. God sent his Son! The essential character of God is love, and such love is patient.

But this passage also makes clear that there’s an end to God’s patience. When the Pharisees are asked what the owner of the vineyard will do when he returns, they reply, “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.” (v. 41) God is patient, but we should remember that there is a limit to God’s patience.

While we’re in school or university or any other educational institution, we go through many tests, in order to prove our worth in those areas. The same is true right throughout our lives. Throughout our lives we undergo all sorts of tests—tests that challenge our beliefs—tests that challenge our commitments. At some point, however, the buck will stop and we will be called to account. There will come a time when we will be held responsible for how we have responded to God’s call. There will come a time when we will be held responsible for that which God, our landowner, has entrusted to us.

## **2. Our Stewardship**

The second thing we learn about is our stewardship of what God has provided us. We are the tenants of the parable. We are the stewards of that which God has entrusted to us. As Christians, we are the stewards of the kingdom of God—and as such, we have a responsibility to our landowner—a responsibility to pay the rent—to make a return on

our profits. The tenants were provided with everything they needed and were given the freedom to work the vineyard as they wished. This was an opportunity for growth! But because of their greed and unfaithfulness, they blew it.

Instead of showing faith, they resorted to greed and murder. They worked the land, but they treated the land as if it was their own. Somehow they forgot that it didn't belong to them. They forgot, or rejected their contract with the landowner.

They owed something to the landowner that they were unwilling to give. The same is often true for us. There is an expectation, that as Christians, we owe something to God—not to earn our salvation but as our response to it. We are to produce the proper fruit—fruit that is worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ—fruit that we return to God, the rightful owner—our worship and our service.

Sometimes, we too forget that we are merely stewards. We're under the delusion of ownership. We think we own things, when in reality it is God who owns of all things. All we have belongs to God. We are only stewards.

What does "ownership" really mean to us anyway? In the end, we will leave this world. When we do, we will leave everything behind. You can't take it all with you. You will never see an Ansett-Wridgeways removals truck following a hearse. Once we truly understand that we are only stewards, we can then really enjoy the good things that God has placed before us. We just need to be able to share it with others as well.

### **3. Jesus the Cornerstone**

The third thing we learn here is in regard to Jesus Christ—the son in the parable. In verse 42, Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

There's a story regarding the building of Solomon's Temple. Fairly early in the building process the stonemasons sent an odd looking stone to the builders. Unable to work out where it fit, they rolled it down an embankment, where it stayed for the many years of the construction. At the very end, the builders went to the stonemasons asking them where the capstone or corner stone was—the stone that connected all the vital pieces together and completed the job. The stonemasons told them that it had already been sent. Then they remembered the stone they rolled down the embankment, many years earlier. They searched for it, finally finding it all covered with moss. They cleaned it up and with it completed the building.

The rejected stone—the crucified Christ—becomes the very cornerstone of God’s kingdom—the kingdom with which we have been entrusted in order to bear good fruit. Unless Christ is the cornerstone of our Christian faith—unless Christ is the cornerstone of the mission of the church—then we merely become do-gooders and social workers within our society.

Verse 44 tells us that, “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” What this means is that, “You can’t break God’s laws; you can only break yourself on them.” It is rather like saying, “You can’t break the law of gravity; you can only break yourself by ignoring it.” People in every age have the option of accepting or rejecting Christ. If we accept the stone, it becomes our sure foundation. If we reject it, we are the losers.

This imagery reminds us that Jesus Christ is to be the cornerstone on which our whole lives are built. It’s not a hobby or a peripheral activity—it’s a central activity. It is to be the centre of our being—the key element in our lives. It is by him that we “live and breath and have our being.”

As we continue to worship together this morning—sharing with one-another in fellowship (and Communion), remember that what we have, has been entrusted to us by God. We are the tenants in God’s kingdom—where we are asked to produce good fruit. It’s not a place where we can grow fat in our religious observance and feel pride in our good works but a place where we become energised by God through his Holy Spirit, to share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ with all whom we meet. And as St. Francis of Assisi, once said. “Sometimes you may need to use words.” With Jesus Christ as your corner stone, may your whole life be a vineyard for God.

To him be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.