

‘The Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.’

(Mark 12:11)

‘I am not a religious man,’ he said, ‘but I do believe in fate.’

- That was a statement from someone I heard recently, probably on the radio – I wonder what he meant?
- ‘Fate’ is often thought of as being a predetermined course of events that is beyond human control
- As far as I understand it, this is an important teaching of Islam – where everything is the will of Allah
- It is also important in Hinduism – being born into a particular caste system is just something to accept
- I think what the man meant was that he believed that some things were just meant to happen
- I think he was unlikely to believe that everything was just meant to happen
- And then it becomes a problem – if some things were meant to happen and others just happened
- How do you distinguish between the two? Obviously, believing in ‘fate’ is more difficult than we thought

Bangle, bungalow, chutney, cot, gymkhana, hullabaloo, juggernaut, jungle, loot, pyjamas, shampoo, veranda!

- Just a dozen words that are common in English but originated in India. Perhaps because of *The Beatles*
- But in any event for nearly 40 years, some religious words have seeped into English, including ‘karma’
- In Hinduism, karma is about the law of cause and effect – because of the Hindu view of reincarnation
- Things that happened in a previous life shape this one, while things that happen in this one shape the next
- Every time we think or do something, we create a cause, which in time will bear its corresponding effects
- so in order to achieve good karma it is important to live life following the Hindu code of righteousness
- Consequently, if the karma of an individual is good enough, the next birth will be rewarding
- and if not, the person may actually devolve and degenerate into a lower life form, as a Hindu writer says
- ‘karma is what is written on your forehead about your life’s journey, as it extends into your next life
- karma is redemptive action you are taking for your past misdeeds and sins’

The Parable of the Tenants in Mark and parallels (Mt. 21:33-46; Lk. 20:9-19) represents a different world view

- this different view is best termed ‘providence’ – this is the way in which God provides for our needs
- it is realising that at whatever point of our life journey we have reached, God reached there before
- God did not create the world but then leave it to its own devices – he cares about his creation

Unlike the impersonal forces of ‘fate’ or even of ‘karma’, behind ‘providence’ there is a personal God

- While we do not need to get so hung up about our language that we are scarcely able to speak
- When we say ‘luckily’ or ‘fortunately’ we cannot literally mean that ‘luck’ or ‘fortune’ were at the helm
- Neither can ‘serendipity’, an unintentional discovery of good, underpin our lives – it is impersonal
- to imply, as some do, that our history is our destiny (history is on/not on our side) is simply not true either
- when Plymouth Argyle lose at a ground on which they have never won before it is not because of history
- it is because they were not as good as the other team – or perhaps they were just unlucky!
- the characters, ‘Lady Luck’ and ‘Mother Nature’ do not exist
- if you remember the story of Abraham – God called him to sacrifice Isaac, the son of the promise
- on Mount Moriah – it was a test but only when Abraham arrived there was the answer revealed
- When Isaac asked where was the sacrifice, Abraham replied that God would provide the sacrifice
- The words, provide and providence are related – Abraham named the mountain, ‘Jehovah-jireh’
- ‘the Lord will provide’, ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided’ (Gen. 22:14)

The Parable of the Tenants is an exploration of providence and the nature of God

- Providence is pictured in the fatherhood of God – it is not total control, neither is it abandonment
- It is not life in the fairground where every ride has a fixed circuit
- Instead, it gives opportunity for his children to respond without crowding their freedom

I PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Matthew (21:18-32) gives us a more complete context of the parable

- While he is teaching in the temple courts, the chief priest and elders confront Jesus about authority
- Jesus tells them that his authority and the authority of John the Baptist come from the same source
- And further illustrates what he has to say with two parables – the Parable of the Tenants is the second
- The watchtower and the wall are means of protecting the vineyard and the ripened grapes
- At the time, absentee landlords were quite common – as much as half the grapes could be taken in rent

The imagery used is very similar to Isaiah 5:1-7 – the first hearers knew that the vineyard was Israel

- At the heart of the story is an unwarranted challenge to rightful authority
- The parable cleverly allows the listener to see the events from the perspective of God's providence
- Not least in his long and turbulent relationship with Israel
- The care that God has put into creating the vineyard
- Is contrasted with the people's ingratitude and lack of fruitfulness, at least in giving God his due

The key to understanding the parable is to focus on three key moments, each marked by direct speech

- 'they will respect my son' (Mark 12:6)
- 'come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours' (Mark 12:7)
- 'what then will the owner of the vineyard do' (Mark 12:9)

The difference between a parable and an allegory is that, taken as a whole, a parable has one main meaning

- Rather than a 'one for one' significance for each part of the story
- Yet the detailed significance of each part of this parable can hardly have been lost on the hearers

II PATIENCE OF GOD

When it came to the time to collect the rent (some fruit of the vineyard), no rent was forthcoming

- Indeed, each of the master's servants was shamefully treated – some were beaten, others killed
- The maltreatment of the prophets by the forebears was readily admitted by later Israel (Mt. 23:29-32)
- So much so that they even built fine tombs for the ancient martyrs – the abuse of the servants worsened
- But in the parable, Jesus continues, that eventually the landlord sent his son – 'they will respect my son'
- The position of the son is different from the prophets, for the landlord can do no more
- So, through the depth of grace, through the exercise of patience, final judgment also comes

American Bible commentator David Garland writes:

The landlord's optimism in sending his son represents God's endless hopefulness and constant effort to bring sinful people to their senses. God fully expects the people to produce fruit and exercises forbearance when they renege on their obligations (Rom. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), and what seems to be utter foolishness in sending prophet after prophet and finally a beloved Son to a pack of murderers. What may look like foolishness to worldly wisdom, however (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 3:18–20), reflects the love and wisdom of God.

It was not through their failure to recognise the Son that they killed him; that would have been pardonable

- They killed him because they recognised him - 'come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours'
- The challenge of the parable was there for all to see
- The claims of Christ were rejected not because the people did not understand them
- But because they people (indeed people through the ages) understand them all too well

III PURPOSES OF GOD

‘What then will the owner of the vineyard do?’ – this is an oratorical device known as a rhetorical question

- For the most part of my ministry I have been used to congregations sitting in silence, often too passively
- But when I have preached to Afro-Caribbean Pentecostal congregations, rhetorical questions are exciting
- Unlike the majority of my congregations who wait for my answer, the congregation give their answer
- Matthew (21:41) shows that the crowd have followed the thinking of Jesus and give the answer
- ‘he will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants’
- But while the crowd reaches the logical conclusion the implications are dramatic
- The nation of Israel is to be replaced by other tenants, ones who will honour the Son and the Father

The tenants lived in a self-centred world; they seemed to have no thought for the landlord

- No sense of right and wrong and no thought as to any alternative to their actions other than their ends
- Killing the servants, and even the son, gave them a false sense of security against judgment
- But when they killed the heir, they had not won, for the landlord was still alive and judgment coming

We are familiar with some verses from Psalm 118, from the triumphal entry or Palm Sunday narrative

- ‘Hosanna’, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ – but now the rejected stone is elevated
- ‘the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone’ (Mk. 12:11)
- What we learn from this parable is that the Son is coming not only for salvation but also for judgment
- In which the rejected stone will become the keystone in the building of God’s new temple
- Where the building will be ‘living stones’ (1 Pet. 2:5) – and these will include Gentiles too
- And this miracle, at God’s hand (grace for all), is marvellous in the eyes of all his people
- The application of the parable was obvious but the religious leaders could not act because of the crowd

The sadness of the parable's conclusion is that the chief priests and teachers of the law

- Understand the parable's meaning all too well and yet reject the offer
- They are the wicked tenants – God's patience and kindness should lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4)
- Instead, it has hardened them in their resistance – they use the temple for their own greedy ends
- But soon, the temple will be swept away (Mk. 13:2) and replaced by a new temple of living stones

Yet the parable of the tenants has a wider application that just to the chief priests and teachers of the law

- For, in more general terms, it is the story of God's relationship with a disobedient and rebellious people
- It is an invitation and a challenge for us to review our stewardship of what God has entrusted to us
- It is a reminder that the church has a particular mission and its leaders and people are accountable to God
- We are not so much about a building but about a community of living stones – have we lost our way?

God requires that our community be a house of prayer for all nations (Mk. 11:17)

- When someone is not welcome because they do not fit in – are we truly that house of prayer
- does it matter if we do not reflect the whole community in which we are set? Yes, it does matter
- God requires our community to be a forgiving one (Mk. 11:25)
- Does it matter if we have negative gossip, bitterness and unresolved grudges? Yes, it does matter
- We should render to God that which belongs to God (Mk. 12:17) and devote ourselves to him (Mk. 12:30)
- Does it matter if, as a community, we have our sense of priorities wrong? Yes, it does matter
- We have to be God's vineyard – a prayerful, forgiving, devoted and loving community
- Built around the Lord Jesus Christ, the stone that binds everything else together
- When we become something different from that, we too are liable for God's judgment
- We live in the providence of God, and for now the patience of God, but must fulfil the purposes of God