

**Matthew 21:33-46**  
**The dangers of denying Jesus**

***Respect and receive Him***

I still find it strange when a TV drama features a visit into a chemistry lab. All the clean and tidy benches, for one thing. But it's the **coloured solutions** in flasks that really get me. Most of *my* time in the lab, flasks weren't filled with those gorgeous bright colours. So I suspect those photographs or scenes are just contrived.

The **deep blue** - probably copper sulfate. The **deep jade green** - probably copper nitrate. The **orange** - a good chance that's potassium dichromate. And the **deep mauve**, very likely potassium permanganate. Just the merest smidgin of that goes a long way. But none of this goes a long way toward convincing me of the reality of the drama. It's just not true to life in a working lab.

It's the same with some more medical things. In the last series of BBC's **Silent Witness**, I remember hearing people several times quoting the names of various drugs with a pronunciation I had never heard before. They really could have done their homework better, if they were really bothered with making it true to life.

And I am amazed that in all sorts of dramas, people are portrayed as acting in ways that are just ridiculously untrue to life. Teachers in TV dramas so often seem to totally forget all the **Safeguarding** training that is drummed into them at every opportunity, and either neglect to report or cavalierly sail on and investigate things that should simply have been flagged up to the school Designated Safeguarding Lead. It's just not true to life!

I know you have to suspend disbelief to some extent with any fiction you read or watch, but it really does need to ring true to life if it's going to seriously pull you in.

And that is precisely what we see in Jesus' parables here, and throughout the Gospels. They are grounded in total everyday believability. Last week we saw "**an everyday story of country folk**" - in Judea in the early decades of the first century AD.

***"A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'"***

(Matthew 21:28)

This was just a baby parable, though. Very little actually happens, and though what Jesus says is surprising in some ways, it doesn't stretch the imagination too greatly.

***"And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go."***

(Matthew 21:29-30)

So Jesus sets up that one-act scenario, and then makes a point from it to the people he's telling it to. But in this next, immediately following parable ...

***“Hear another parable. ...”***

(Matthew 21:33)

... it's rather different. This is much more involved. And although it starts, once again, with something totally recognisable and believable to his hearers ...

***“There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.”***

(Matthew 21:33)

... by the end, Jesus has very cleverly persuaded us to listen to something really absurd - if we stopped to think about it - in order to make a further and really quite devastating point. In the first little parable, Jesus zooms in on his hearers' - his *accusers*', actually - rejection of John the Baptist, and how that prejudiced their chances in the Kingdom of God. But **Jesus' second parable warns the whole Jewish nation of their peril if they reject him.**

And that isn't just something for dim and distant history. It should stop us in our tracks. If God would do *that* to that nation that he called “his chosen people” ... what will he do with us if we reject his son? That's clearly what this second parable is about, as we see as Jesus approaches the big punch-line:

***“Finally he sent his son to them, ...”***

(Matthew 21:37)

But we've got to spend a while seeing just how Jesus gets to this point, or we'll still likely miss the immense force and importance of what he is saying.

So remember the setting. Coming to the last quarter of Matthew's Gospel, and Matthew is describing the events of the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. The preacher from distant northern Galilee has reached Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of the Jewish world, and the temple, the spiritual centre of Jerusalem.

This *should* be coming home. He *should* have been received by the people who had been told about his coming down through the centuries. But that's not how it turns out. As John summarised it:

***He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.***

(John 1:11)

In fact, on account of all he has said, and probably most recently done, too, trashing the various money-making schemes that had hijacked the temple's Court of

the Gentiles, he is not just *not received*, but received with hostility. He enters the temple again, and a group of hostiles immediately homes in on his position.

***And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, ...***

(Matthew 21:23)

They look to take the high ground, insisting that Jesus, in effect, should give them his credentials:

***“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”***

(Matthew 21:23)

And yet, as Jesus shows them, they're out of their depth making this claim. They rejected the claims of John the Baptist - and John the Baptist had proclaimed Jesus as way superior, way greater than himself. So they therefore disqualify themselves from taking a position of judgement over Jesus.

But Jesus does not leave it there. He warns them that they are disqualifying themselves from the Kingdom of God - the very thing they were claiming to represent:

***Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. ... you did not believe [John], but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.”***

(Matthew 21:31-32)

But Jesus does not leave it *there*, either. He has given this stern warning to those chief priests and elders. But there is a warning for the nation as a whole, too. Parable number two.

***“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country.”***

(Matthew 21:33)

We would understand this kind of thing here in Cornwall, with second homes. This “master of a house” could well be a foreigner, who has bought up property in Judea, and then returned to the relative comforts of up-country civilisation. But you have to give him his due, he has done a good job doing up this vineyard. He hasn't just planted it, but he has fitted it out with a fence to keep out destructive animals like wild pigs, not to mention human intruders too. There's a lookout tower as a further security measure. And there's the winepress on-site, so that when it is harvest time, the grapes can be processed briskly.

But the Jews of Jesus' day wouldn't just identify with that. You start talking vineyards in a possibly religious context, and their familiarity with the OT would take them back to the prophecy of Isaiah:

***Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; ...***

(Isaiah 5:1-2)

That would sort of *resonate*, we would say nowadays, with Jesus' parable, wouldn't you say? They would know that "my beloved" there has to be God himself. And the vineyard, if you follow through the analogy, has to be the people of Israel, God's special nation. But good Jews who know their scriptures would know how *that* continued, too.

***... and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.***

(Isaiah 5:2)

In modern terms, that would be some specially cultivated plant that has "reverted to type". We've got a **variegated Hebe** just outside our front door - but some of the leaves have been "reverting to type", just green, rather than yellow and green. So "wild grapes" here in Isaiah 5 would be grapes far less suitable for wine-making.

Just "how come" the cultivated grapes went back to wild type doesn't really need to be asked or answered. But God's response to it, back in 600 BC, was clear.

***And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.***

(Isaiah 5:5)

And if you're wondering what the fruit *should* have been, that's specified.

***For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!***

(Isaiah 5:7)

But that's *not* quite how Jesus applies the picture, back in AD 30-something Jerusalem. He is going to customise this image. He's going to take it from something quite straightforward and everyday to something quite surreal. First, it's harvest time, and the owner is looking to receive the rental payment that is due.

***"When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit."***

(Matthew 21:34)

All very normal. But here's a shock. Just a bit of an over-reaction!

***"And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another."***

(Matthew 21:35)

You'd think that there might be reprisals ... *should* be reprisals. But here's a second shock. No, not yet. Patience - under already extreme provocation. A second chance. Though upping the stakes a bit: a few more bodies sent.

***"Again he sent other servants, more than the first."***

(Matthew 21:36)

And actually, "a few more bodies" is precisely what we get. And yet, there is still a kind of logic here. We say "might as well be hung for a sheep instead of a lamb". What have they got to lose now, these tenant farmers? Maybe this second show of strength will persuade this absentee landlord that he should cut his losses now. It *could* all hang together.

***"And they did the same to them."***

(Matthew 21:36)

Now, *surely*, it has to be either a climb-down from the landlord, or retribution. He's got to be permitted to send the troops in mob-handed against this kind of urban terrorism. But no ... and here is where it gets really freaky. A few servants are killed. Then a bigger group are treated the same. What's left to do that makes any kind of sense? Surely nobody could have seen this *next* step coming!

***"Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'"***

(Matthew 21:37)

I mean, this is an absurd level of patience, isn't it? And an absurd level of risk. You'd maybe even say this guy is naive, trusting in human nature. Actually, I'd say, you *shouldn't* trust in human nature very greatly. I remember someone one of the leaders said, back at RBC in my early days, when there was some atrocity or other in the national or international news - and we've seen something of that just recently in our own county

"Some people say that it destroys their faith in human nature, but it just *confirms* mine." If you understand the fallenness of human nature, you will *not* put ultimate faith - or perhaps any great measure of faith at all - in human beings. Atrocities should not surprise us. We should be realistic about how human beings can and all too often do behave.

And yet it seems as if Jesus' landowner has not yet learned this. Folks, *don't* try to spin this out of the context of this parable. Jesus *isn't* saying that God is naive. He's not saying that God sending his Son into this world was a huge gamble on his

part, that he just couldn't foresee one way or the other how it was going to pan out. That's stretching parables too far.

Here, it is just meant to stagger us, most likely about the single feature of the amazing patience of God, the amazing long-suffering of God, this unwillingness to exact retribution that is due. If it wasn't for that ... would any of us be here? If God had not been graciously patient with us, down through our lives ... what hope would any of us still have?

So ... as this parable suddenly lurches into the surreal ... we are now held, wondering *which way will this go?* Will they respect this son? Surely they wouldn't dare touch *him* ... would they? Jesus does not keep his hearers waiting long for the astounding punch line.

***But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. ...'***

(Matthew 21:38)

*We've got to back down now, haven't we? The game is up!* But no. A final wild gamble.

***"'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."***

(Matthew 21:38-39)

And now Jesus puts these people he's talking to on the spot, once again. And this is such a useful way to pursue a conversation like this. Turn it around. Ask them what *they* would do. What's *their* take on it?

***"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"***

(Matthew 21:40)

And just as with the previous parable, Jesus has really only left them one answer. It's obvious, isn't it?

***They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."***

(Matthew 21:41)

And you'd have to say it's *fair*, too. The ESV has missed a trick here, using the words **wretches** and **miserable**. It should have said a *wretched* death, because Matthew has used the same root word in both cases. They have behaved *wretchedly*, so a *wretched* death is entirely deserved.

The other half of the answer makes so much sense too, doesn't it? If it is the ancient equivalent of "Buy to Let" ... how else is the owner going to recover his

outgoings? He has to get a fair income as a landlord. He will find tenants who *will* deliver.

But of course, in giving this answer, Jesus' accusers are just further accusing themselves. We're looking at it with hindsight, of course, and we've read the last lines of this chapter already. It must have come to a bombshell to them, though. For Jesus has not just told a story; he has illustrated Scripture.

***Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"***

(Matthew 21:42)

Quoting Psalm 118, as we read earlier. That psalm should already be echoing in these Jewish leaders' ears. It was only a couple of days earlier when this Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem, and the crowd didn't just cheer and applaud, but *quoted Psalm 118*:

***Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!***

(Psalms 118:25-26)

"Save us, we pray" - that becomes the word "Hosanna". See it now in Matthew's account, earlier in the chapter:

***And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"***

(Matthew 21:9)

Those words about the rejected stone are quoted later in the NT, too, clearly applied to what happened to Jesus himself. Peter and John, answering the Jewish Sanhedrin:

***"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone."***

(Acts 4:11)

Peter, writing generally to believers around the Roman world:

***As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ...***

(1 Peter 2:4)

But there's another word-play here that we miss in English, but one that Jewish-speaking people couldn't possibly have missed. Jesus has been speaking about a son:

***“Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’”***

(Matthew 21:37)

But when Jesus goes on to speak about a stone, the Hebrew word for *stone* is very similar in sound to their word for *son*. Think about that famous film, **Ben-Hur**. The character is Judah *Ben-Hur*, Judah the *son of Hur*. And you can see the Jewish word for *stone* in an OT name: the stone of help:

***Then Samuel took a stone ... and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, “Till now the LORD has helped us.”***

(1 Samuel 7:12)

So the *son* that has been rejected easily - to a Jewish ear - slides over into that *stone* that was been rejected. And yet, in the new temple that was going to be built, that stone was going to be the key component, cornerstone or capstone, whichever. So there is a future for that rejected son, definitely. But for the ones doing the rejection, the very opposite:

***“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”***

(Matthew 21:43)

And *you* there, I suspect, is not just the leaders - chief priests and elders, remember - but the nation, because the replacement tenants are not just “people” but a *people*, a race, that’s the word. It’s only going to be forty years later when that happens: Roman forces will invade Jerusalem one final time, and the words that Jesus would speak only hours after this parable would be proved true:

***Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”***

(Matthew 24:1-2)

And finally the light - or is it the darkness? - starts to dawn on these chief priests and elders - and we find the group included Pharisees, too:

***When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.***

(Matthew 21:45)

But look, for them it just remains a matter of politics, not truth. Words like that are a personal insult, something that just should not be said, even if it’s true. That’s a frightful state to be in, isn’t it? God walking the world in person, speaking, pleading, warning as clearly as he can ...

***“Truly, I say to you, ...”***

(Matthew 21:31)



But the truth that applies to them and the nation they claim to lead is subservient to what it is politically acceptable to say. The system is above criticism - even if it is rotten to the core. And the one who dares to mouth such affronts needs to be silenced, by whatever means are necessary.

***And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.***

(Matthew 21:46)

Folks, we've gone through this parable, but I'd just like to go over it and make a few points for us to think through just briefly now, and in more depth this evening.

Did you notice ...

- **The certainty of "the coming"**

We presume that this world is just going to continue on and on forever. Even as Christians, we think and act, for the most part, as if Jesus' return is going to be at least decades off, probably after we are long gone from this earth. But Jesus, in this parable, says *when*:

***"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"***

(Matthew 21:40)

Walking around York Minster a couple of weeks ago, Jenny and I came across one particular tomb, and the writing above it which finished with the Latin words ***EXPECTANS ADVENTUM***: awaiting the Coming.

Folks, that is a proper hope for those who have died in faith. Isn't it also a proper hope for those who are *living* by faith?

- **The patience of God**

Those tenants, we might well have thought, deserved retribution right from the start. Folks, don't we? Don't we agree that ...

***... the wages of sin is death, ...***

(Romans 6:23)

So it is just the gracious patience of God that defers immediate payment of those wages. And therefore, mustn't we consider ourselves living on borrowed time, if we have not responded to that gracious patience in the intended way?

***Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?***

(Romans 2:4)

Folks, what is God being patient about with *you*? Where are you refusing to repent? I don't mean, *where are you not yet succeeding in conquering something specific that pains and grieves you to fall into yet again?* In that case you *have* recognised that there is sin that needs to be turned from. I'm much more thinking about sin that we refuse to acknowledge as sin, sin that we insist we can justify, sin that is not really sin, in the full sense of the word. Folks, where might we be presuming upon God's patience?

- **If God did *this* to *them* ... then what about us?**

Remember who Jesus was speaking to *and about*. In the parable that we looked at last week, his warning was for the Jewish leaders. In today's, it was the Jewish *nation*. His special chosen people. The people he had even called "his son":

***Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me."***

(Exodus 4:22-23)

But when you come to the NT, you start to realise that Israel failed to live up to that high calling. They were maybe a picture of what "my firstborn son" was going to be, but it was a limited picture. A hint. A foreshadowing. But not the real deal. There is another son, the *true* Son of God, who is to come. And as for the son who proves, in time, to be only a *false* son ...

***"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."***

(Matthew 21:43)

Now it is individual Jews who come to the Saviour - and we have quite a few of them numbered or even named in the NT - but no longer the nation as a whole. Maybe again in the future, in some way, I think we have hints in the book of Romans, but that's not where I want to go right now.

Instead, I'm thinking about nations nowadays. I'm thinking about this country in particular, or, more generally, what are or were sometimes called "Christian countries". I remember seeing a map in a Readers' Digest book when I was a kid, with so much of the globe painted blue, I think it was, "Christian" ... just like in the glory days of the British Empire, and the colour pink.

Folks, if the *Jewish* nation, with their special privileges, can lose the kingdom of God, then how much do you think our British history will count for us as a nation. Great Gospel blessings in the past ... but largely forgotten or even despised nowadays. There's an interesting quote from J C Ryle I would like to share with you this evening on this point.

So folks, if God did *this* to *them* ... how should we be praying for *this* country?

- **But is it *all* “about them”?**

And here's a wild one to finish with. Did you notice the conclusion Jesus' hearers came to?

***When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.***

(Matthew 21:45)

Sometimes, perhaps most of the time, we refuse to accept that the Scriptures are speaking about us ... or even *to* us. We **block our ears**. We turn our eyes away. We turn the volume down on the voice of God, and insist *this cannot be me that you're talking about*.

But there is actually an opposite error to consider, too: thinking that the Bible is far too much about us. We read the story of David and Goliath, for example, and imagine ourselves as the young hero with the sling. And we miss the fact that David is probably far more meant to be to us a picture of the Son of God going to war against apparently insurmountable odds, to save his people.

Folks, do we read the Bible to find some delightful fluffy thought each day about finding inner peace and joy ... or to see Jesus?

That's one reason why I'm pleased that at this point on Sunday mornings now, once again, we'll be breaking bread. A slight change to how we do this. We don't think it's wise to try to get three people crammed along the edge of the table there. Individual pieces of bread, a pre-cut loaf.

But reminding ourselves that, yes, we are involved, of course, in that wonderful story of salvation, but the story is really all about him. My life is now lived in relationship to *him*.

***I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.***

(Galatians 2:20)

“They will respect him”, said the landowner in Jesus' story. Do more than that. Respect him, of course. But receive him as your Saviour. And draw near, now, by faith ... in the Son of God ... who loved *you* and gave himself for *you*.

***Respect and receive Him***