

Reading: Mark 12:1-12

Context of the reading

Our reading this morning is a very complex reading especially with regard to its interpretation.

Mark is the oldest Gospel account in our Bibles and is mostly the resource for Matthew and Luke's Gospel. So the story of the tenants can also be found in Matthew and Luke. However, Matthew's version differs considerably from Mark and Luke. It becomes even more complicated that this parable can also be found in the gospel of Thomas. The gospel of Thomas is a book that was found in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It is written in Coptic. It contains several sayings of Jesus of which half of them can also be found in the other Gospels in the bible. The other half contains material from the Gnostic or in other words from the "secret knowledge philosophical" tradition.

But there are also differences between Mark and the Gospel of Thomas.

These findings emphasize the fact that there was a general oral tradition in the first century Mediterranean world that was retold not only by the canonical Bible Gospels but also by other non- canonical texts.

So let us start with our text.

Mark says that there was man who planted a vineyard. Luke repeats what Mark said. The Gospel of Thomas adds that he was a "good man". Matthew says he was a land owner.

The differences are striking. Matthew is saying what Mark and Luke were implying. The man who planted the vineyard was shameful in the eyes of society because he was a landowner. No-one in Palestine had more than one piece of land. Everyone had the same piece of land. So anyone that had more than one piece of land could only get it through either stealing it or by cheating. To sell off your inheritance, which could have been the family's piece of land, would have been frowned upon. What is implied here, becomes even clearer in the addition of Thomas who had to add that he was "good man".

So he sends out his servant to collect his "fruit" – a part of the income from the vineyard. But they reacted by beating him and not giving him any of the collected "fruit". This was a grievous insult to the honour of the owner of the vineyard. They were actually doing it to the landowner himself because the man that he sent was representing him and acting as him. The landowner had to react because his honour was at stake. So how did he react?

The landowner sent out another servant. But the tenants did the same to him or in the words of both Mark and Luke "treated him shamefully" implying treating the landowner "shamefully". In the Gospel of Thomas there is no mention of this as a "shameful" attack. Again the landowner's honour is challenged making the tenants the victors for the second time. Although their two acts of violence were shameful, they were acquiring honour because the landowner does nothing to challenge them.

And then according to Mark and Matthew he sent out several others of which some were beaten and others killed. Luke and the Gospel of Thomas do not mention any of these.

But then the landowner acts in a very foolish way by sending his son, thinking that the tenants will respect his son and therefore him as well. These words can be found in Mark, Matthew and Luke, and the Gospel of Thomas. But clearly the tenants had no respect for the landowner and killed his son and threw him out of the vineyard, which means they did not even bother to bury him which was an even more shameful thing to do. According to the value system of honour and shame, in a culture of an eye for an eye, the landowner had only one option namely to strike and kill the tenants and give his vineyard to other tenants.

Most biblical scholars agree that the original parable ended here leaving the story with the owner as a fool, the tenants beings bandits and the messengers being beaten or murdered.

Scholars have come to this conclusion because Jesus never answered the questions provoked by the parables. To them the question remains: how can a foolish and incompetent master suddenly become powerful? I think for certain that the question and the quotation from Psalm 118 were later added to give the parable a much better hopeful outcome. It draws the resurrection of Jesus into this story and turns the story of defeat into triumph.

So what does the original parable mean without the hopeful end?

The clue lies in verse ⁷“But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’

In biblical times this would not have made sense at all. The tenants thought foolishly that by killing the landowners son, they could claim his inheritance. It

did not work like this in biblical times. Mark and the other writers knew this. By saying it – they meant something different and we need to read between the lines.

If the parable is about the kingdom the plot fails and the inheritance is in doubt. To whom does the inheritance belong? Who has power to claim it? (see Scott BB 1990, Hear then the Parable:253)

There is a definitive shift of focus within the parable from the kingdom's predictable victory to the kingdom as an object of tragedy. In the parable the kingdom becomes a place of violence and corruption.

Our parable challenges the predictability of the kingdom's heirs as good and that the true heirs will triumph in the end. In the parable the final fate of the vineyard is unresolved because the owner is still alive. But his fate may be that of the son. Amen

Reflection on the reading

The text for the sermon is verse 7: "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'

In the parable the tenants are a portrayal of humanity at its core. No wonder the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders were offended. It was a shoe that fitted them very well.

And it is not only the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders that are mentioned. It is a portrayal of you and me.

This text is a stark reminder of the utter corruptive state of humans before the salvation of Jesus Christ. On this Sunday we need to remember our sinful past, and the broken relationship that existed between God and us. We need to remember that if God did not redeem us through Jesus Christ, we would not have inherited the kingdom of God. We need to remember that our salvation came from God.

We also need to remember that we still reject God on a daily basis through our words, thoughts and deeds. We need to remember to ask for the forgiveness of our sins and ask God on a daily basis to help us when we face trials and temptations.

Yes, you and I are the tenants who sometimes lose perspective and think that we can play God over others, thinking that we are better, more holier than others. This is a false perspective and something that all of us of faith need to reject. We need to show the world that we are vulnerable too, that we are in desperate need of God's help and protection. We need to show the world the scars and sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the salvation of our sins.

And yes we need to also have the future perspective of verses 9 to 12 at heart, to know that Jesus Christ was resurrected and ascended to heaven to prepare our place in God's eternal kingdom.

As humans, you and I need each other as brothers and sisters in faith, not only on this journey of Lent but on all our journeys on earth. We need to remind one another of our true sinful nature but also of Christ who paid the price for our sins. We need to remind each other of the love that God have for us. We

need to take each other's hands and remind each other of the merciful hand of God who leads us through life. We need each other when we feel vulnerable and alone, desperate for help. We need each other to talk about our faith, hope and love. We need each other to remind one another to follow God in everything we do, think or say.

We also need to remember that you and I have responsibilities. We are temporary tenants of God's vineyard. And what can be expected from tenants on earth, 1) Pay the rent 2) Raise a crop 3) Maintain the property of the landlord.

Well in the same way we need to follow and obey God. We need to harvest the seeds that God is sowing on earth. We need to look after ourselves and other human beings physically and mentally, care for others, look after God's creation in a responsible and eco-friendly way. Yes we are tenants, passing through life to inherit God's kingdom not because we deserve it, but through the mercy and grace of God.

On this day as we remember and confess our sins, may God have mercy upon our souls! Let us always remember to say in our prayers: *Mea culpa; peccavi; Domine miserere mei* "Through my fault. I have sinned. Lord, have mercy on me"

Amen