

SERMON: 4 October 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Harvest

We usually celebrate harvest at the end of the growing season, around about now in our part of the world.

However, in the ancient Hebrew calendar, Harvest was the 2nd of the 3 great festivals (Exodus 23). The first being Passover early in the year and the third being the Ingathering at the end.

So what we call harvest is similar to the ancient Festival of Ingathering that God asked his people to observe.

The idea was the same. The crops that had grown right through the summer would be gathered in.

The Scriptures use lots of farming examples.

Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures.

And there's no doubt that Jesus is referring to the scriptures Isaiah 5 when he addresses the

With the parable of the vineyard.

Remember the context. He's criticising the organised religion of the day for failing to bear fruit.

And he's just finished telling the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law that corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes would get into the Kingdom of God before them.

God, the owner of the vineyard, expected justice but only saw violence and blood; looked for righteousness but only heard a cry.

The vineyard is meant to produce fruit.

Psalm 80:12

Interesting to note that it does produce fruit even though the farmers are wicked.

And the passers by benefit. In other words the fruit isn't wasted but is enjoyed by others, outsiders.

In the parable, Jesus identifies with the owner's son who is sent to manage the vineyard following the murder of the workers who were sent before, like the prophets who came before Jesus

Think of it. Jesus thrown out of Jerusalem and killed.

Someone sent me this cartoon image recently and I really wish it wasn't true

You can see the point. It's a statement against judgementalism, the sort of thing that makes people feel unwelcome in the church on the grounds that they're different.

In the cartoon Jesus goes with the outsider.

But it echoes Jesus' words about corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes getting into God's kingdom before the self righteous insiders who were keen to guard their territory.

Christ is found often on the margins, marginalised, rather than in the centre.

The church has had to learn to no longer command a place of centrality and that's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact it's probably the way God prefers it.

Richard Rohr put it like this recently when talking about the history of the church since the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal in the 4th century,

"As long as the Church bore witness from the margins in some sense, and as long as we operated from a minority position, we had greater access to the truth, to the Gospel, to Jesus. In our time we have to find a way to disestablish ourselves, to identify with our powerlessness instead of our power, our dependence instead of our independence, our communion instead of our individualism".

What do you think of the idea of the vineyard falling into the hands of outsiders or people on the margins?

Because it seems from the parable that the Master will take it away from the ones who should've cared for it and give it to others who will take it and enable fruit to come from it.

Maybe there is a sense that one of the results of this global pandemic is to take some of the church's centrality away, even more so than post modernism has done to date.

And maybe that's not a bad thing.

I sometimes hear people in the church bemoan the fact that the church no longer commands the place of respect it once had.

I don't think we'll ever return to those days. And I'm not sure that's a bad thing.

Jesus showed, in his life, the way he went about things, that he was rarely the centre of attention in terms of the status of the Jewish religion of the time.

Yet people flocked to him, and were attracted to him, because people are attracted to love and truth, and he embodied both.

His life was fruitful, in the sense that as he laid down his life he was likened to the seed that falls to the ground and dies in order to produce a crop.

So is this the way to produce fruit?

Because fruit production is the mark of the kingdom and a sign of a harvest. It's what the Master goes looking for. It's what he sends his workers out to do - gather fruit.

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus is the example of fruitfulness in life.

The example which Paul gave his life to and summed up in the 3rd chapter of his letter to the Philippians where he considers his past achievements in the faith as mere dross compared to knowing Christ

Knowing Christ is the key, that's what was important to Paul and it's what led to his life bearing fruit just like his Master had done before him.

Paul goes on to affirm the idea of his life being offered like a seed falling to the ground when he says that he wants to suffer with Christ and share in his death so that he might experience the resurrection from the dead.

He knows he's only where he is by grace not because he was a pious religious person in the past.

And he's let go of his life and he's willing to die for the cause.

He's glimpsed the heavenly prize in the call of God in Christ Jesus, his Lord.

And that's all that matters.

That's what he's aiming for.

Everything he does now will be done with that one aim and in that one power.

We sang the song earlier that spoke of all I once held dear and built my life now being counted as loss compared to knowing Jesus and loving God.

Love is like a seed that falls to the ground and dies in order to burst forth in resurrection power.

Like Paul, we all need to continually let go of who we once were in order to take hold of who we are becoming, as being made in God's image.

It's time to let go and give yourself to the love of God.

It's time to leave behind our tendency to be defensive and judgemental so that we might include rather than exclude.

It's time to put our selfish egos to death and instead trust in the Lord to defend us.

It's time to rejoice at our place out in the margins, and embrace our rejection and our failings and our fallings.

It's time for justice and righteousness to flow freely, in homes, in families, in neighbourhoods, in communities, in nations, in workplaces, in places of learning, and in the way we do business.

It's time to look for fruit in everyone and everything.