

Sermon by Robin Trotter
Proper 22 year A

Good news and bad

We have a new vicar and he seems to be settling in. We're getting used to him and things are good. Alex our organist has started at Keele University, where he has already met Lord Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury and Neil Baldwin. I have started my theology course at Wycliffe Hall. But on the news we see terrible news about the Islamic State, so called, and the beheading of Alan Henning – what are we to make of it? What can we do? Such news shakes us out of our complacency. Last week we had our harvest festival. We ploughed the fields and scattered and sang that all good things around us are sent from heaven above.

Quite right. But what about the evil?

Today's lessons, including the psalm, were all about vineyards. And vineyards are a usual picture in the bible for Israel. God plants it, tends it loves it, looks after it, but, in Isaiah and in Jesus's parable things go wrong.

Parables generally only make one point – and the details are not important. Here the details do have meaning and Jesus's hearers knew it well. We are in Jerusalem, after the triumphal entry, the story was aimed at the chief priests and the Pharisees. The vineyard is the people of Israel, the owner is God himself. The tenants are the religious leaders of Israel. The servants are the prophets and the Son is Jesus himself.

What does it say about God? – God trusts his people – he lets them get on with things. He went away on a journey. He is patient – he sent servant after servant to the vineyard - prophet after prophet to Israel. But, Jesus says, there will come a time when it is too late for more warnings. There is judgement. He will bring those wretches to an end. And the vineyard will be rented out to new tenants, to the Gentiles.

The parable speaks of humanity too. The vineyard was well prepared, it had everything it needed to produce fruit and wine. Israel was given everything it needed to be God's holy people. It was also given space, freedom. But there was accountability, there was work to do, Israel was trusted. And Israel's sin was deliberate. Finally the parable talks of Jesus. He is not another servant, he is the owner's son. But he too will be taken and killed. Remember this story was told in Holy week – the Cross was only days away.

Perhaps this would be a good reading for the harvest Festival.

Jesus doesn't tell us how profitable the vineyard was. Was it a success after all the care lavished on it by the owner? Presumably it was, would people kill for a useless plot of land, but for profit? At the harvest festival we heard of the fool who built bigger and bigger barns to store his wealth, who never had a chance to enjoy it. It's the same thing, isn't it? Greed. Selfishness. Me me me ... And all this addressed to the religious authorities of Israel!

Yet Jesus goes on to say something, more cryptic perhaps, but to scribes and Pharisees, easy to grasp about stones. The stone that was rejected has become the capstone – that's psalm 118, and the people will stumble on the stone and be crushed by it. The time of the present order is to ending. Roman rule, and the rule of the Herods and their friends in Israel will come to an end, and the stone, Jesus himself will become the head of a new Kingdom.

If all this is right we are the new tenants. We, the church in all its glory and imperfection, are the new Israel. And as we look around at the world, going its own way, we might long for God to build a good strong wall around us, to keep us safe. We huddle together in our lovely buildings on Sundays. We are frightened of the news, of our neighbours. We fear for the good things around us. We pray, we give, we help our neighbours. We try to make a difference, we feel inadequate.

This wonderful, or should that be 'terrible', parable tells us that God knows how it is. It tells us that His Son knows how it is. He was in all this involved, involved to the death. He was executed by religious fanatics, and yet he triumphed. He rose again on the third day, and he rules now to us hope and new life. We long for, we pray for, the coming of the Kingdom. We try to do our bit. But it will come in God's time. The Victory is won. The Victory is God's. In the mean time God doesn't want us to huddle, as if in hiding, as if surrounded by a wall, like the vineyard, but to be out in it, challenging the world to go God's way, telling them that is hope and that there will be joy, that the Victory of the Son, who was rejected, and killed, and rose again is good news for the world. In him is our safety. In him is our shelter. In him is our life. Eternally.