

Sermon Archive 605

Sunday 4 October, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 21: 33-46

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Inside the parable:

It begins with planting the grape vines. For years I resisted the desire to plant a vine - because I lived in houses surrounded by gardens that were not my own. I had, in the back of my mind, some vision from Isaiah, that when the exile was over, and the people were able to settle, make a home again, one of the things they'd do was plant their grapevines. So it wasn't until I moved into my own house in Papanui, that I allowed myself to plant a vine. It's doing all right, my vine is - and I've enjoyed eating the odd grape that speaks of my being at home. There is something creative, settling, hopeful involved in the act of planting out the vineyard.

And so it is, within the parable, that the land-owner in Jesus' imagination plants his vines. It feels like an act of settling, belonging, staying, being part of the place.

Yet, once the land-owner in this parable plants the vines, he also puts a fence around it, and builds a watchtower. These are fortifications - so they speak to something else in the mind of the land-owner. In the mind of the landowner - a sense of being at home, a putting down of roots, a believing in productivity - but *also* an acknowledgement that defence might be required. Why build a fence - unless there be a fear that something will need protecting? Why build a watchtower - unless there be a need to spot people of ill will approaching? Is that paranoia? Or is it a street-wise knowledge of what's necessary in our world?

Whatever is the case, maybe, another level of defence (paranoid or wise) comes through the land-owner's appointing of people to maintain the fence, and to operate the watchtower.

Happily, no arriving threat is spotted from the watchtower. No assault is made on the fence. Alas, the real threat is already within the defences. The people chosen to protect the vines begin to see the vines as their own - or if not their

own, then at least vulnerable to their harvesting. The building of the fence and watchtower was wasted, because the genuine threat to the vines already had been let inside.

Stepping outside the parable

I have vulnerabilities. I have tender things that I hold close - and share only with people in whom I have deep trust. Some are about what I've done. Some are about who I am. Some are about what I hope for - about love. These are vines planted in the soil of my soul. They are precious. I think that God thinks they're lovely. We all have these vines.

Also, in my role as a minister, over the years I have been trusted with other people's vulnerabilities - the vines they've grown behind their fences, and above which they've erected their watchtowers. I have been careful, and in the main successful, about not stealing the vines, or abusing their owners.

Shall we climb back into the parable?

Back inside the parable, a few representatives of the owner come back to the vineyard to collect what is proper. There are just a few of them - which indicates perhaps that the paranoia (or carefulness) that moved the construction of the watchtower hadn't seeped into the owners trust of those appointed to care for the vineyard. This isn't going to be a war - he must reckon - it'll be an interaction of order, cooperation and innocence.

But now violence erupts. I guess the owner knows that violence exists in the wider world, since initially he erected a watchtower. But maybe it's surprising to him that the violence is present within - among those advantageously positioned ones who were trusted to do the right thing. One person is beaten, one is stoned, and one is killed. The killed one doesn't go home to his family. He's gone - all for a bowl of grapes.

Interestingly, the land-owner doesn't shift greatly at this stage in terms of strategy. When you're trying to claim what is yours, you send people to claim it. And if the last group of claimers was small enough to be vulnerable, you just send a larger group. This is pretty much the rule of escalation in warfare. On the same terms as before, you send bigger troops. And the result in this parable? No more success - just more violence and death.

Let's step outside the parable again.

Someone had the courage to take a complaint to the church. A person in a trusted relationship had stolen someone's vines. We move from that first act of violence, to sending a group of people asking for justice. A second act of violence is done as Father "So and so" is moved from this parish to another garden of vines, fences, and usurped watchtowers. Bringing more force to the request to receive what justice demands, meets more violence from the violent. Everything is typical of itself. Nothing is changing.

Back into the parable we go.

The land-owner notes the lack of progress, and wonders whether it might be that these people he's communicating with think that, in terms of power, they're untouchable. Maybe what they need is to be confronted not by servants of the land, but someone with birthright - the beloved Son (in all his first-born authority). Maybe "upping" the "chain of command" will persuade them. They're people of the execution of power - maybe what they need is confrontation by power from further up the chain.

Alas. They do not recognise the chain. They're anarchists - grabbing what they can, because they can. Their way of thinking is not about order, or justice, or what is right. They do not care for what we used to call "the rules based order" Their mantra is "Smash and grab".

Outside the parable we go.

We know these types. The world has many. We see them on the global stage. They smash and grab, as if they're untouchable. And the political structures around them enable them.

Back into the parable we go.

Back in the parable, Jesus asks a question of his listeners: when the owner of the vineyard arrives, back, what will he do? (Jesus asks brilliant open questions!) His audience, whipped up by outrage at the death of the slaves and the son, the violence of the violent, of course predict death and eternal punishment - because they also are part of the world of violence that meets violence with violence.

And, interestingly, the understanding that the arrival of the owner would be more successful than the arrival of the Son would work, is curious. They haven't respected the slaves of the owner. They haven't respected the son of the owner. Why would they respect the owner himself? The chain of

command has already failed to move them - so why the highest authority would move them is an open question. Maybe something other than *authority* is required. "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do". "Surely this man was the Son of God". "He is risen; he is risen indeed".

Something other than authority.

Outside the parable we go - Well, outside the parable, but not outside the reading. At the end of the reading, we find the Pharisees absorbing the weight of the parable.

They know that it's not about a vineyard, or a watchtower - but maybe it's about a fence. And maybe it's about a trusted group of people whose task it was to bring people inside the fence, but decided to go thieving instead. The vulnerabilities, the trust, the hope, the slow-growing things of God that God should be allowed to harvest.

They don't enjoy very much being encouraged to consider these things. In fact they are described as wanting to arrest him (more force and violence). The only reason they *don't* is because of their fear of the people. The people of violence, can't respond to God, but continue to be directed by their fear of the people. Is that not to be pitied? The parable undoes them - they know that they are defeated.

Outside the parable, and maybe even outside the sermon, we go.

God has planted a rich and beautiful garden. We have been invited to tend that garden (maybe in some ways to tend the watchtower), until God comes joyfully to harvest what has grown. In the course of it all, we all are invited to share one another's vulnerabilities. We all are called to honour that we belong to God - and that no one belongs to us. We are called to serve and nurture one another - and to do all things with love, humility, and a desire to relinquish all things to God when harvest time comes.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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