

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019

Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C: Isaiah 43:14–21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:8–14; Luke 20:9–19*

Matthew and Luke follow Mark in telling the parable of the vineyard. When what are called “The Dead Sea Scrolls” were discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945, another version for this story was found, perhaps earlier than the one Mark, Matthew, and Luke knew.¹

Mark and Matthew locate the story at the beginning of Jesus’ third day in Jerusalem. In Mark and Luke, Jesus’ teaching begins with Jesus being questioned about his authority. So he asks, “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” The “chief priests, and the scribes, with the elders” decide to respond that they do not know. Jesus says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things”—but he actually does tell them. His response is today’s gospel lesson, called “The Parable of the Vineyard” by the *New Oxford Annotated Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.²

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 28, 28A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), II:1280.

² *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1275.

It's also known as the Parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants,³ the Parable of the Wicked Tenant Farmers,⁴ and, more accurately, the Parable of the Murderous Winegrowers.⁵

New Testament scholar François Bovon in his commentary on Luke wrote that Luke's Jesus sees "what threatens him and demonstrates that his foreknowledge and his obedience go together."⁶ Since the resurrection, Christians have looked to the Hebrew Scriptures to understand and proclaim the Christ. That's why in our first lesson we heard from Isaiah, "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: . . . 'I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King' . . . 'Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'"⁷

I am among those who think Luke wants us to see God as the owner and the son who is murdered as the

³ *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1868.

⁴ Fitzmyer, 1276–88.

⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53*, trans. James Crouch, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 32–46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷ Isaiah 43:14–19a.

Christ. This parable is about God and about people who refused to be found by God, again, about Jesus' foreknowledge and obedience.

Adrian Fortescue was born in England in 1874, two years after his father, a married priest in the Church of England, left the church to become a Roman Catholic. Fortescue became a Roman Catholic priest, well-known for his liturgical writing. On and off I have been reading a recent biography.⁸ Fortescue died young, of cancer, at the age of 49 in 1923. During the Great War—World War I—he wrote, “. . . it is always lawful, it is often a duty, to inflict physical evil when this is the necessary mean for preventing greater evil Neither philosophy nor the Christian faith teaches that physical evil does not exist or can cease to exist in this imperfect world.”⁹ For me, the existence of true evil remains the greatest challenge to faith. If there is an answer, one for Christians, it is Isaiah's understanding of God's Suffering Servant, the one who “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . .

⁸ Aidan Nichols, *The Latin Clerk: The Life, Work, and Travels of Adrian Fortescue* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2011).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

[on whom] the Lord has laid . . . the iniquity of us all.”¹⁰

The Greek verb “*zētéoō*”—“to seek”—is not just verb about the movement of our bodies, but of the human will.¹¹ No more than a week before Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was in Jericho. The tax collector Zacchaeus heard he was there, and he sought to see him. But Jesus was seeking him. In Zacchaeus’ house, he proclaimed, “The Son of man came to seek”—“*zētéoō*”—“and to save the lost.”¹² The Parable of the Vineyard concludes with “the scribes and the chief priests,” but not “the people,” are seeking—same verb—a way stop Jesus.¹³ Next Sunday, of course, is the Sunday of the Passion. After the Liturgy of the Palms, we will read Luke’s account of Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death. God’s answer for us to evil is resurrection.

For me, the idea of “sainthood” includes men, women, and children of whatever religion, or no religion, who have been shadowed by great evil, who

¹⁰ Isaiah 53:5–6.

¹¹ Bovon, 43.

¹² Luke 19:10.

¹³ Luke 20:19.

nonetheless have hearts that enable them to live good, heroic lives, looking forward, not backward. Humans have wills that, with God's grace, can help us to look forward in our lives, in spite of whatever burdens and shadows of our pasts we may carry with us.

Finally, I want to close with an explanation, I hope, of Jesus' quotation from Psalm 118, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner."¹⁴ There's a wordplay here.

"*Ben*"—as in the movie *Ben Hur*—means in Hebrew "son of." The Hebrew word for stone is *'eben*.¹⁵ Confusing in English; not confusing if you know the Hebrew. Christian preaching has always seen a prophetic word about Jesus Christ in the Hebrew Scriptures—though not always respectfully, accurately, or compassionately.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁴ Luke 20:17.

¹⁵ Bovon, 37.