

RECEIVE THE SACRIFICE

Good Friday

Matthew 21:33-41

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

There are all kinds of methods that have been used in human history to take the life of someone who has committed a capital crime. There are firing squads, lethal injections, or hanging from a tree or a scaffold. It is not a scaffold we look at today but a cross. Because the cross looms so large in our faith story, each Good Friday it is as if it is happening all over again. We were not eyewitnesses to the event, yet the image of Christ crucified is so indelibly inscribed on our spiritual memory that this comes to us as no ordinary day.

During the week before his death, Jesus was in the temple being drilled by the chief priests and elders about just what authority he had to do the things he had been doing. In response, he confronted those who were plotting his death with a haunting parable.

Jesus' story tells of a vineyard owner who left his vineyard to be cared for by tenants. At harvest time, he sent servants to collect his share of the harvest. The tenants beat one of the servants, stoned another and killed a third. Next, he sent even more servants, but they received the same violent treatment. Finally, he sent his son, positive that the violent tenants would respect him, but they even

killed his son. In their warped thinking, they hoped somehow to get his inheritance.

Like Nathan confronting a sinful David, Jesus asked the religious leaders what the vineyard owner would do to the tenants when he came to confront them in person. They responded by saying that he would kill the evil tenants and lease the vineyard to others who would rightly share the harvest. Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23 about a rejected stone becoming a cornerstone.

He tells them that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to others who bear fruit. It is a masterful use of story and question, leading his listeners to condemn themselves.

Matthew tells us that the chief priests and elders understood the parable. They were the violent tenants. The vineyard, the kingdom, was not theirs to own. It belonged to God, and they were its stewards. The servants they had beaten, stoned and killed were the prophets sent to Israel to prepare them for the Messiah. And the vineyard owner's son in the story? He was Jesus himself, the Son of God. Soon, he knew, they would kill him.

What stands out in the parable as we gather on Good Friday is the violence toward the son. Jesus came bearing the truth. He embodied the truth about God, about humanity, about sin, about love. He was, literally, "the truth" (Jn 14:6). Yet the stewards of the truth responded to him with jealousy, injustice and terrible violence.

To watch Jesus suffering on the cross for the sins of humanity is to see pain and injustice at its worst. It is to look across the world today and know that in the 21st century after his crucifixion, people still kill people, beat them and stone them, in the name of religion. It happened to believers in Egypt a week ago, and hardly a week goes by when there are no killings in the name of religion. People still die for the truth. People still die in the name of the one on the cross. "Will you suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from this Christian faith?" They have, and they will.

Listen to what Jesus cries out from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet in his last breath, he prays like a child falling asleep in his father's arms, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." As he dies, God the Father hears his prayer and responds/ The relentless God of

grace, who sent servant after servant only to find violent rejection, has even sent his Son. There in the shadow, keeping watch, we know, God is not finished here. The redemption, the sacrifice, all is complete. But there in the shadow of the cross, God has one more move, and it comes Sunday.

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