

In a world of violence Jesus is the unexpected cornerstone ...

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Isaiah 5.1-7 Ps 80.7-15 Philippians 3; Matthew 21.33-46

I have been reading a book that John Jok lent me last week that gives an account of the struggle for independence for South Sudan. It has been good to read more about this story. It is a story of amazing determination. How incredible that the people of South Sudan simply did not give up? Political leaders and religious leaders over many, many years kept trying to find a solution. They kept agitating and negotiating for independence and freedom. But it is also a story full of suffering, oppression, war and violence. Part of John Garang's success where so many other's had failed seems to be that both sides had finally had enough of the endless war. It is like the story of the freeing of the Israelites in the book of Exodus where the Pharaoh finally agreed to 'let God's people go'. He only did that once he had suffered enough terror and violence from the plagues of Egypt.

But what a terrible cost. What untold suffering. So many decades of war and violence to get to the point where real change became possible. Unfortunately violence seems to be the only language that some people understand. Violence seems to be the only way that many human beings relate to each other. And violence of course is hardly ever isolated. Physical violence, while often a stand-alone issue, is likely the end result of other kinds of conflict, i.e. two countries may war with each other when diplomatic (political) efforts are exhausted, or a victim of emotional violence may 'snap' and attempt to kill their tormentor. Violence too is the final outcome of the way all human groups scapegoat those who are different, that is 'not one of us'. Once we begin to blame one group, one person or another, for what is wrong in our culture, our society or family, it is a short step to locking them up, labeling them as sick, mad or bad and finally resorting to physical violence to control or punish. Sometimes we simply use violence to get what we want, to serve our own selfish gain.

The story that Jesus tells today in Matthew's Gospel is a story full of violence. The story tells of a man who plants a vineyard. He puts a fence around it, builds a wine press ready to process the grapes and constructs a watchtower. He does a good job doesn't he of creating a garden that has all the potential to produce fruit? He rents it out to other people and goes to another country. But when he sends his servants to collect his rent they are beaten and killed. The same thing happens to the next set of servants. Finally his own son is beaten and killed. Killed because the tenants want to seize the vineyard for themselves. Their greed and desire results in suffering and death. It is a bloody, violent story.

What happens in the story is so obviously unjust and wrong. Yet this is exactly what happens in so many parts of the world, in so many times and places. When the Turkish frigate captain Salim pushed his way through the Nile Sudd in 1839 to gain access to South Sudan, the slave trade and decades of violence and injustice came as well. When the nation of Israel builds 8 meter walls to control the population of Palestine, even though that is supposedly for the Israelis national safety, violence and injustice comes as well. When Australia locks up refugees who come by boat supposedly to deter people smugglers, violence and injustice also arrive. There are so many innocent victims in all of this travail.

Yet the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants tells us that this long and seemingly endless list of injustice and violence is not all there is. The vineyard can mean I think many things. Given where this parable sits in the rest of the Gospel it is sometimes taken to be the Jewish temple, it's laws and it's sacrificial system. It can also mean creation and the earth that

provides for our needs. It could also just mean the gift of our life. The parable tells us that God does not GIVE us the vineyard. We are not its owners. We are tenants. We are stewards. God has entrusted the vineyard to us. We are left in charge and God expects that we will bear good fruit. In the parable the vineyard owner's son is sent to the tenants. Likewise Jesus, God's son is sent to us. Like the son in the parable he too is rejected, thrown out, beaten and killed. Because that is what we humans did to Jesus the Christ. We rejected, tortured and killed him.

When Jesus asks the question *'what will he do to those tenants?'* they said to him, *'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'* It almost sounds reasonable doesn't it? Can you imagine how the father must have felt when the tenants killed the servants and then killed his son? His grief, anguish and frustration would have been enormous. I cannot begin to comprehend how a parent would cope with the knowledge that a beloved child had been murdered, particularly as they were doing something on behalf of the parent. And so we hear what Jesus listeners are saying the Father would do, that is kill the wrongdoers, punish them with a 'miserable death' and we find ourselves agreeing. They do deserve death. They don't deserve to live.

But here's the thing. When Jesus Christ, the murdered Son of God returns to the community who had abandoned him, tortured and murdered him he does not, nor does his Father God, put them to a 'miserable death'. Instead he offers them peace and forgiveness. God offers all of humanity and all of creation peace and forgiveness. This parable is sometimes called the parable of the passion of Christ. But it does not tell us the whole story, only what we think is the whole story. The outcome of the real passion of Christ is something quite different. In the place of violence there is peace and forgiveness. This is the radical message of God in Christ. For me this is why Jesus is the cornerstone of existence. In the parable Jesus, quoting Psalm 118, makes the claim that *'the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'*. He is talking of himself as the Son of God, who comes in the place of his Father, the vineyard owner.

The cornerstone (or foundation stone) concept is derived from the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, so important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, thus determining the position of the entire structure. One of the jobs that David my husband has decided not to do is the brickwork on our house at the coast. He knows how important it is to get those foundations right. When I was watching the brickies construct our retaining walls I noticed they were incredibly careful with the first few bricks. They measured carefully, lined things up, checked and rechecked. They laid the first brick and then carefully lined the first row up with that one brick. It was slow and painstaking but after that it all went lightening fast. In the same way Jesus the Christ is the key element in our lives that we must have in the right place - that is front and centre. He is the centre around which all other things are connected or held together or lined up by. When we get that right then all other things will fall into place and we will be led into peace and forgiveness.

In our parable the contrast to this are the tenants whose lives revolved around self and what they can get for themselves. How much of violence in the world, in our communities and perhaps even in our own lives are because we humans are out to get what we can for ourselves?

Sometimes we can be self-centred because we are hurt and frightened — like a child with a toothache all we can think about is ourselves and our pain. Sometimes we are self-centred because we are fearful — will we have enough money or food for the future? And so we hoard, steal or manipulate to get what we want. But sometimes we are just plain greedy. We want much more than we need and are prepared to hurt and wound to get it. The tragic thing

about the wicked tenants in the vineyard was that they were living in a beautiful, well constructed vineyard. One they hadn't even built themselves. They lived in a place that provided for them and by all accounts was easy to work and protect but it just wasn't enough. First they wanted to live there and work the land - which is the agreement they had with the owner.

Then they wanted to keep all the produce themselves and then they wanted to own the whole vineyard. Would that have finally been enough? I think not - people like that will move on to stealing other vineyards and accumulating more of what does not belong to them. Sadly the whole of our western capitalist culture is built on this endless pursuit of material wealth. It is built on desire and greed. Every single advertisement on television is quite simply about greed. Getting us to want more and more things that we do not need.

The absolute wonder and miracle of God and of his son Jesus and of his Holy Spirit is that we are not left in this wilderness of grumpiness, guilt, desire, greed and self-centredness. We are not left to suffer the consequences of our appalling behaviour to others and ourselves. We have the cornerstone. The key to a different life and way of being. We have something, some person, some divinity, beyond ourselves, higher than ourselves, around whom we can centre our lives. Bit by bit, as we do that, day-by-day, we are led into peace, forgiveness, into generosity and gratitude, into loving relationships with other people and the world we live in.

May Christ Jesus be the cornerstone in our lives. May we love God before all else. May we live his peace. May we desire and love only what our Lord wills for us. Amen