The Parable of the Tenants
Luke 20:1-19

This morning we're wrapping up our summer series on the stories Jesus told – and we started this series by saying that stories like the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son, have left their mark on our culture – but much more than that, they can leave a mark on our lives. And that's certainly true for this, our last one: the Parable of the Tenants.

Reading: Luke 20:1-19

If you noticed, Jesus tells this parable in response to a demand from the religious leaders: v1-2, 'The chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to [Jesus], "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority."'

And the question is, what things? What things has Jesus been up to that have provoked them? Well, immediately before this episode, Luke tells us three things that Jesus has done. He's travelled down from Galilee to Jerusalem and entered the city in a scene we call the Triumphal Entry – on the back of a donkey, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies of how Israel's king would come, with the crowd calling out in Luke 19:38, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" And then he entered the Temple at Jerusalem - the epicenter of Jewish life and religion, the place where heaven and earth intersected, and threw out all the money-changers, and livestock sellers, and profiteers. And then, just as he might do with your heart – having cleansed the temple, he didn't leave it empty. Luke tells us in chapter 19:47 'And he was teaching daily in the temple.' And then, 20:1, 'Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel.' So he's entered Jerusalem as its king, he's emptied the temple of its rubbish, and instead filled it with good news.

And in response the religious leaders demand to know: by what authority you do these things – encouraging people to think you're their king; telling us how we should or shouldn't worship, or do business, and telling people what they should believe or think: I mean, who do you think you are?

And in response Jesus asks them who they thought John the Baptist was – where his authority came from. But did you notice they were unwilling to answer? And that said everything. Because, clearly, they had refused to believe John – and they didn't want him telling them how to live. So why not admit that? Because they were afraid of the people, it was simple fear of others, of what they might think of them, if they said what they really believed.

And so it's in response to this question of authority: who's the king with ultimate authority, in their lives and in ours, who and what and how should you worship, who can and should define how you see your life and the world, that Jesus tells this parable.

Are You an Owner or a Tenant?
Now, if you know the Old Testament, you'll know that one picture the writers use of Israel is that she's the Lord's vineyard. And so when Jesus says in v9, that, 'A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants' it's pretty obvious that the

owner, the man planting the vineyard, is God. And so, on one level, the tenants to whom he entrusts the vineyard are these religious leaders, aren't they – and they were to tend the vineyard, and lead and care for Israel, not for their own profit or gain or self-advancement, but for God, and his glory, and the good of his people. But they hadn't done that, instead it they'd used power for their own gain, and deep down they knew it, or at least, as Luke says in v19, they knew that Jesus 'had told this parable against them.'

And yet Jesus doesn't *just* tell this parable to them. He doesn't take them aside and give them a sort-of private warning. In v9 Luke tells us that Jesus 'began to tell the *people* this parable.' Because whilst at one level this is about the leaders, at another, it's for everyone.

You see, the vineyard doesn't just represent Israel – it represents all of life. And the problem is that whether it's these religious leaders, or the people of Israel, or you and me, we can all think we're the owner, and like the tenants in the parable, we behave like we're the owner, when in fact we're tenants.

My father died when I was a student, and of all the issues we had to try and sort one of them was my father's troublesome tenant. And if tenants go bad they can fall into one of two main errors, can't they. Either, they know the property they're renting isn't theirs, so they don't care for it as they should and they behave more like squatters than tenants. Or, they forget that the property isn't theirs. And they think of themselves as the owner, and they think they can start telling the owner what to do, and rather than just having tenants' rights, they begin to think they have proprietorial rights, and the whole relationship is inverted.

And in this parable Jesus is saying that's exactly what happens with us and God. Life, the universe, and everything – the vineyard - belongs to him, he's the owner, and you and I, and these religious leaders, and the people, are tenants, called to live and steward our lives, and everything he gives us, for him. But, we don't like it that way. And like the tenants in this parable – we want to run our lives our way. We don't want to be told that God is the king we must serve, we don't want to be told who, or how, or what we should worship, or how we should live and do business, or what we should think and believe, or how we should view all of life. *We* want that authority – for ourselves. As Paul says in Romans 8:7, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh [the life where I'm at the centre, not God] is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot.'

Now, if you think Paul's exaggerating there, think about it. Our natural heart, how we are by nature, strongly dislikes the idea of a God who won't let me be in control, doesn't it. I mean, if you wanted to define our current culture, you could call it a 'I'm the owner-culture' – couldn't you? I'm the owner of my body – so no one can tell me what I can, or can't, do with it. Or, I'm the owner of my life, or my abilities, or my sexuality, or my gifts, or my goods – and no one can tell me what I should or shouldn't do with them. No one can tell me how I should think.

In fact, our culture positively encourages that attitude – don't let anyone tell you how you should live, no authority figures, no institutions, not your parents, not your friends, you've got to be true to you, because you're the owner. In a 1992 ruling that's subsequently famous, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who announced his retirement a few weeks back, wrote: 'At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and the mystery of human of life.' i.e. you get to define what's good and bad, what's right and wrong, what the meaning of life is, for yourself – if you're free, no one else can tell you that.

And Jesus is saying, no, you're not the owner, you're a tenant. God has placed you in the garden of your life, of his world, to tend it for his glory and for the good of others.

And deep down we know we're not the owner, don't we? And that explains our hostility to God – because we want to be the owner, but we know, instinctively we know, we're not. Think about it: you have this innate sense of justice, don't you? You want the wrong to be punished and the right to be vindicated, but that makes no sense unless there's some kind of ultimate Judge – an ultimate owner above you; you have this sense that some things are just plain wrong – whatever the age, whatever the culture – but that makes no sense if all values are culturally determined, unless there is an ultimate Source of values to which everyone must bend the knee; you have this sense that your life has meaning, that in all the great expanse of the universe that you, this tiny speck, matter – but that makes no sense unless there's an ultimate Meaning Maker; you experience moments of transcendence, which make no sense unless there is something, someone, higher and greater and more beautiful than you – something or someone out of this world – *the* Owner.

You see, think how screwy it is to think you're the owner. One of my uncles used to help manage the Crown Estates – the farms owned by the queen. And those farms were run by tenant farmers, to make a profit for the crown. But imagine if one of those farmers suddenly began to think they were the queen – and began dressing like her and behaving like her, and keeping the profits for themselves. It wouldn't be long before the queen had something to say about it, would it. And Jesus is saying to them and to us – you're not the owner, you're not the king, you're a tenant farmer. And you must tend the vineyard, Israel, or the garden of your life – your possessions, your talents, your skills, your intelligence, your physical body, the way he wants you to, and for his glory, not your own.

But the problem is, that in our natural selves, we don't want to do that. So what does God do? Verse 10 of this parable, Jesus says, 'When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard.'

The Messengers God Sends

And in this story Jesus describes how the owner sent one servant after another to the tenants: v10 again, 'He sent a servant to the tenants'; v11, 'He sent another servant.' Verse 12, 'And he sent yet a third' - just as God had done for Israel, one

prophet after another, to call the people back to Him, to live in right relationship with Him – and bear the wonderful fruit of that in their lives. But in the parable Jesus tells how the tenants beat up the servants and chucked them out of the vineyard, just as Israel had repeatedly rejected the prophets. And in so doing, they had rejected, not just God's authority, but his patient, steadfast love for them.

Now you might hear that and think, 'sure, but I don't think I've ever even met a prophet, let alone beaten one up!' Sure, but how have you welcomed the messengers that he has sent to you? The messengers that tell you, you're not the owner, you're not the one in control? Think of those things that come into your life that tell you you're not self-sufficient, that you can't do life on your own, that ultimately you don't have the power and control over your life that you thought you did, or wish you did, that tell you you're just a tenant, not an owner. Maybe that's sickness, and you come face to face with just how vulnerable you are; maybe it's a family tragedy, or unemployment – and you realize you cannot fix this problem on your own; maybe it's a character defect that you want to change – and you try to, but you realize you just can't do it. Maybe it's something you long for, that you wish could happen, but it doesn't and you have no power to make it happen.

Or maybe it's a friend or, worse, a parent, or your wife, or husband, or teenage daughter, who says something to you – and they remind you that you're not God. Or maybe it really is one of these prophets, and their writings, in the Bible, telling you, listen you're not the centre of the universe, you're not the owner, you're not the king. You're a tenant.

And God keeps sending these messengers into your life because, just as with Israel, he loves you and is patient with you, and gives you, not just one, but multiple opportunities to turn back to him and live for his glory and not your own, and live for others and not yourself, to find your ultimate joy in him and nowhere else. But what do you do with those messengers? Do you embrace them, or resent them. Do you welcome them as messengers of grace, reminding you that you are finite and he is infinite, or do you beat them up and throw them out of the vineyard?

You see, if you're not yet a Christian maybe you think these messengers that humble you – like illness, or tragedy, or job loss, are a reason *not* to believe in a God of infinite love. Because, if there really was a God of love and if he really was all powerful, he wouldn't let this happen to me. Or if you are a Christian, maybe these things tempt you to doubt that God really loves you and cares for you. But what if they're the very opposite? What if these are messengers, sent out of his boundless covenant love for you, to remind you – I'm the Owner, and you'll only ever live the fruitful life you want to live in right relationship with me.

After all, at the very heart of Christianity, and of conversion, is this life-changing realization that I'm not God, God is. And if in our natural minds we resent God's claim over our lives, when we become Christians that begins to change. And

whilst everyone else might be in denial, if you're a Christian you know, 'God, you are my owner, you're my king.'

You see, as Paul writes in Romans 2:4, it's possible to presume 'on the riches of [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.' And God's messengers to our lives always come with a purpose, to lead us to repentance. And in this story, despite all the tenants' provocation, the owner's patience still isn't exhausted. And despite what they – and Israel – had done to his servants - he doesn't send in the army. Verse 13, 'Then the owner of the vineyard said, what shall I do? I will send my beloved son.'

Tenants and the Son

In that wonderful Psalm, David says, '[God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities' (103:10). And what's remarkable about this story is despite their behaviour, the owner doesn't want to treat the tenants as his enemies – he wants to win them as his friends. So he sends the thing most valuable to him – and in words that echo those God the Father spoke over Jesus at his baptism, the owner sends his *beloved Son*.

And so, as he tells this story, it's as if Jesus is standing before these religious leaders, and the people, and is making God's final appeal to them: 'Be reconciled to me.' But the tenants don't want any of that, do they? They want the vineyard, not the owner, they want the fruit not the Son, just as Israel then, and all of humanity now, want the blessings, and the life, and the riches, but not the God who sends them – not the king to whom they really belong.

And so the tenants do the unthinkable, v15, 'they threw [the owner's son] out of the vineyard and killed him.' You see, Jesus knows that the leaders, and the people, are going to reject Him, and as the son in the story is thrown out of the vineyard, so Jesus will be lead out of the city to be crucified – to die the death of the cursed on a Roman cross – to experience the ultimate rejection by the people of Israel.

And yet that's not the end of the story, is it? Instead, Jesus asks the crowd, v15 'What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?' How will a God of justice treat those who have repelled His grace, who have scorned His patience, who have murdered His son? And Jesus answers for them, v16 'He will come and destroy those tenants.'

You see, living as if you're the owner, and rejecting Jesus has consequences. In fact, Jesus describes it in v18 as either falling on a stone, and being broken in pieces, or having it fall on you and being crushed to pieces – neither of which you want. And within 40 years of Jesus telling this story, Jerusalem was destroyed, and it's stones thrown down, at the hands of the Romans. Because none of us can hope to spend our life rejecting God, and his overtures to our hearts, and that not destroy you on the inside, and eternally.

But like one of those stories where you get to choose the ending, or a film with an alternate conclusion, there is an alternative! It doesn't have to end this way. Look at verse 17, where Jesus quotes Psalm 118: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.' You see, yes, you can be broken by Jesus, but you can also build your life on him. You can reject him, but you can also make him the foundation stone of your life. You can refuse him, *but* you can also make him the one through whom everything in your life hangs together, the one who bears the weight. The one thing you can never be with Jesus is neutral.

You see, these religious leaders thought that by rejecting Jesus they could deny his claims of authority over them and thwart his plans. 'He thinks he's the king, the one who can tell us how we should live. Well, not now', and they crucified him. And as he hung on the cross they stood around it, mocking him – 'if he's the Christ, the Messiah, the King – let him save himself!' And yet, it's precisely there, as he refused to save himself, that he was saving us, making his enemies his friends.

And it's at the cross that Christ took the place of an enemy, the punishment of one who thinks he's the owner.

You see, in the Old Testament, God spells out the consequences that will fall upon Israel if they live in the land as if they're the owners. And those curses culminate with the threat that Israel will be thrown out of the land and cut off from the presence of God. But in Galatians 3:13 Paul writes that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.' And at the cross, Jesus stepped into our place, the place of the cursed, the place of those who live like their owners, and the rock of God's judgment fell on him and he was crushed for our iniquities, and he was broken for our sins.

And in doing so he killed the enmity between us and God. He did everything necessary that you and I can be reconciled to God, so that we, his enemies, could become his friends.

And now, how will you live? You see, Christ is risen from the dead, and God has vindicated him as his beloved Son, and he's the Stone on which everything is being built. So, will you go on living as if you're the owner? Or will you let his love, and his patience, and his grace, and the supreme sacrifice of his Son, melt you? Will you put your paper crown on your head, thinking you're the king or queen, or will you bow before him – with a heart full of gratitude to the one who died for you? Will you be broken by him, or will you build on him? Will you use his good gifts for yourself, or will you live in the vineyard, his vineyard, of the talents and wealth and intellect and body and soul he's given you, for his glory and the good of others?

So, as we break bread together now, come humbly to the true king, acknowledging all the times you've not lived as you should, and receive his free forgiveness for your past, and his abundant grace for a life of fruitfulness for the future.