**The Parable of the Tenants**
**Luke 20:9-19**

Now there is a quote, which I'm sure you know, which goes 'context is king.' And if you want to understand this parable that is certainly the case: you've got to get the context.

And that context is that Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. And specifically, He's arrived at the temple because in chapters 20 and 21 all the action is focused on the Temple. Luke tells us that the first thing Jesus did when he arrived in Jerusalem was to enter the temple and cleanse it. He goes into the very heart, into the epicenter of Jewish religion and Jewish life, where heaven and earth intersected and in this violent scene that Mark told us about last week He throws out all the money changers and livestock sellers who are defiling it, and in particular who are defiling the Court of the Gentiles – the Temple court where non-Jews like you and I could go and encounter God.

Then, Luke tells us, in the beginning of chapter 20, that Jesus spent time teaching in the Temple. He tells us, as we saw last week, that Jesus was in the temple 'preaching the gospel' (20:1) – proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

But Jesus' actions and words, seriously upset the religious elite – the chief priests, scribes and elders, and they want to know, v2, 'by what authority you do these things.' 'I mean, who do you think you are, Jesus?'

And in response Jesus tells them this parable, it's the parable of the wicked tenants. And incredibly, the implication of this parable is that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, who the people and these leaders are going to reject, with results that are going to be so profound that, like when you drop a stone in a pond, they will spread out from this epicenter of Jerusalem across the globe. What right does Jesus have to do and say what He does? What right does He have to cleanse the Temple and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in the Temple? He has every right – He is the son and heir of the owner himself who is working out his plan of redemption for the whole world.

And from this parable we're going to look at three things: the patience of God, the Son of God, and then the judgment and grace of God.

**The Patience of God**
Just for a moment let's skip right to the end of the parable where Luke tells us in v19 that 'the scribes and the chief priests… perceived [Jesus] had told this parable against them.' Now, they're right of course, these leaders weren't so blind they couldn't see that. And yet, whilst Jesus may be aiming it specifically at the leaders, it's also directed at all the people, generally. Luke tells us in v9 that Jesus 'began to tell the people [not just the leaders] this parable.' So, this wasn't just a private word of warning to the elite. Jesus is warning everyone who hears Him, because ultimately it wasn't just the elite who rejected Jesus. If you were an average Jewish person in Jerusalem during this week of Passover and you were in the crowd at Jesus' trial, calling out for Pilate to release Barabbas instead of Jesus, you couldn't just point the finger of blame at the politicians and say, 'it's all their fault we're in this mess!' No – the people as a whole were culpable of rejecting Jesus.

And the reason that matters is it helps us identify who the tenants in the parable are. V9, Jesus said, 'A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants.' Now, it doesn't take much to work out that the man planting the vineyard is a picture of God. Now, despite the fact that one key Old Testament picture of Israel as a nation is of a vineyard, Jesus subtly changes that image here. The people of Israel, and particularly her leaders, but the people as a whole, are the tenants – and the vineyard is not Israel but rather the place of blessing, the place of God's promises, the place of being in the centre of God's will, and plans and purposes. And that place of blessing had been entrusted to Israel and they're the tenants

And so one of the first things we can say about this is that they weren't the owner, God is the owner. Israel had been entrusted with His promises and His blessing as tenants. Now, if we just apply that for a moment to ourselves, can you see how the same is true for us? We are, all of us, just tenants. Tenants of our lives, tenants of the things God entrusts to us, tenants of the promises and blessings He gives to us.

Now, if you've ever owned a property and let it out to others, then you'll know some of the problems you can have with tenants. My father died when I was in my early twenties, and of all the issues I had to try and sort with my mother the two most pressing ones were how do we keep the business afloat, and how do we deal with my father's troublesome tenant.

And I reckon if they go bad, tenants – and lets face it here in Switzerland most of us are tenants - can fall into one of two main errors. The first error they might fall into is that, knowing the property they are renting is not theirs, they don't care for it as they should; they just shrug their shoulders at any damage they might do to the property, 'what the heck, it's not mine to worry about' and they don't care for it as they should. They behave more like squatters than tenants. But the other error tenants can fall into is that they forget that the property is not theirs. They come to think of themselves as the owner, it's their home after all, and they think they can start telling the owner what to do, and they begin to think that rather than having just tenants' rights, they have proprietorial rights, and the whole relationship is inverted.

Well, in this parable Jesus is saying, 'yup, and when it comes to Israel being tenants of God's blessing, that is the error they have fallen into.' And if we're honest, it can be true for us as well.

We can so easily forget that God and His universe were not created for our glory, but we for His. We tend to think of life, the universe and everything as being centred around us, 'me – I'm the centre', when all the time He is the centre. And when we place ourselves at the centre, we can begin to think that God exists to meet my needs and to bless me, and I'm the owner and He is my servant, my tenant, and I'm the one with proprietorial rights and God exists to bring my rights about.

Now, apart from the fact that when we look at the sheer size of the universe and what that says about God, and how incredibly small we are in comparison, such an attitude is just plain funny, when we think like that, it can have two damaging effects.

Firstly, just as Israel did, we can begin to misuse God's blessings. Like bankers who forget what they are gambling with is not their own wealth but that which is entrusted to them by others, we can take our lives, our time, our resources, our intellects, our relationships, everything that has been entrusted to us, and put them all to work for our glory, not His. We can begin to think these things are ours, to do with as we like, when all the time God is the owner, we are just tenants.

But the second damaging effect such thinking can have is that when we think God is there to bless us, that we're the owner and He's the tenant who exists to do our bidding, our world can fall apart when He fails to do so. When God seemingly lets you down and doesn't do what you want Him to do – you can be overcome by disappointment, even to the point of turning away from Him. After all, why bother with God if it doesn't get you what you want? But so often, that response has at its root this wrong thinking that you and I are at the centre, that God exists for us, and to make us happy, when the truth is that He has created us for Him and for His glory.

And the tragic history of the nation of Israel was one of constantly getting this wrong. It was a sad story of faithless tenancy. Entrusted with the promises and the blessings of God, charged to be a light to the nations, they staggered from one apostasy to another. Time and again they simply walked away from the Lord, wanting to do their own thing, worshipping their own gods, pleasing themselves – living as if they were the owner, not the tenants. And as well as it being a tragic and sad history it was a long one. Jesus describes in the parable how the owner 'went into another country for a *long* while' (v9).

Now, if you know anything of Old Testament history, that is a picture of God's incredible patience and steadfast love to His people in the face of one provocation after another. Now, if you speak to my girls, they would tell you that when it comes to patience I am not exactly a winner. But this parable is a picture of God the Father's incredible longsuffering forbearance as He works out His plan of redemption through Israel.

Jesus describes how the owner sent one servant after another to the tenants, so that, v10, 'they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard.' And in the history of Israel, God kept on raising up His prophets, men like Samuel and Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, to call the people back to Himself, to urge them to bear the fruit of walking in right relationship with Him. And, there were some successes, there were times of genuine revival, with the people turning back to God in repentance and faith, but like a plane that is falling out of the sky, there are moments when you think the pilot is going to pull this up, but all the time the ground is coming closer and the tragedy of Israel as a people was that the overall trajectory was downward. And in the parable Jesus

describes the tenants beating up the servants and chucking them out of the vineyard empty handed, just as Israel rejected the patient love of God.

So lest anyone thinks that God responds in some knee-jerk fit of pique, Jesus reminds us that God is incredibly patient – and that is true for His people corporately and for the likes of you and me individually. He is a patient, steadfast, longsuffering God.

And if you haven't experienced it yet, I suspect you will, that when you stray from the path, just as with Israel, He sends multiple warnings. Maybe you get involved in a relationship or a business deal or some project or other and there's this voice, most likely your conscience, telling you it's wrong; but you want to do it and so you silence the voice. But God is gracious and patient and so you find yourself reading something in the Bible and it leaps out at you, and then you hear something at church and your ears prick up, and then a friend says something to you and it cuts to your heart, and those are warnings: now they're not big and imposing, they're not Isaiahs or Jeremiahs or John the Baptists but they are God's gracious, repeated warnings, displays of His patience towards you, drawing you, calling you back to the narrow path.

Because as with Israel, it is patience with a purpose, these are warnings for a reason. And so His patience, as Israel discovered, is not limitless. I think one of the scariest stories in the Old Testament is that of Samson: a man of incredible potential who blew it in spectacular fashion. And the major faultline of his character was women and sex. And he eventually shacked up with a Philistine woman called Delilah. And in league with the Philistine rulers, she tried to drag out of Samson what the secret of his strength was. But he just played around with her, and over three separate nights gave her three spurious reasons. But eventually she wore him down and he told her. And that night she had his hair cut off as he slept in her lap. And the writer of Judges tells us that when he awoke to her taunts he said to himself (16:20), "I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.' Samson had played with fire once too often. He thought he could just keep on getting away with it, and discovered to his great loss that he couldn't.

You see, as Paul tells us in Romans 2:4, it is 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.' God's patience with Israel and with us, in sending warnings, is with a purpose, to lead us to repentance. I don't think any of us want to be like Samson and exhaust that patience. Proverbs 29:1 says, 'He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.' And the lesson from Israel is that you can stiffen your neck so much, that eventually it breaks and you lose your head. So if you are conscious of God warning you to repent in some area, listen to that voice, don't presume on His patience.

But get this, in the parable, despite all the provocation from the tenants, the owner's patience is still not exhausted. They have persistently rejected his overtures, and beaten up his servants – just as Israel had dismissed the prophets,

and yet he doesn't send in security, he doesn't send the baliffs, he doesn't send an army, he sends his son. V13, 'Then the owner of the vineyard said, what shall I do? I will send my beloved son.'

This owner already has grounds, he's already got all the evidence he needs to chuck them out, but he doesn't. Why? Because amazingly he doesn't want them as his enemies, he wants to win them over, he wants them to see sense, and so he sends – his beloved son. He sends the thing most valuable to him – surely they'll listen to him?

**The Son of God**
It's incredible isn't it? God is a God of patience and mercy and grace and in the words of Psalm 103 (v10) 'He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.' And so rather than send in the army, the owner sends his son.

His beloved son. And given that those are the words that God the Father spoke over Jesus at His baptism, there's no question who Jesus thinks this beloved son in the parable is. And so Jesus is standing before the leaders and the people as God's last appeal to them: 'Be reconciled to me.' But sadly, the tenants don't want any of that. They want the vineyard not the owner, just as Israel and however many since, want the blessings and the promises, but not the God who sends them.

And so the tenants do the unthinkable. They throw the owner's son out of the vineyard and kill him. So desperate are they to live without having to put up with the owner, they'll kill his son.

Now, if this was a merely human story, that might be the end of it. The owner might retreat heartbroken – 'why was I so stupid to do what I did, why did I send my son, I've lost my beloved boy for the sake of a vineyard, why didn't I just give it to them?' Or he might respond in blind vengeance: 'I will slaughter them and their sons and level the vineyard to the ground, and no-one will ever plant or harvest their again.'

But it's not a merely human story. You see, Jesus knows that the leaders and the people are going to reject Him, and mirroring the son being thrown out of the vineyard, He will be lead out of the city to be crucified as a criminal on a Roman cross - the ultimate rejection by the people of Israel. And yet that's not the end. Whilst in one sense it is the climax, the ultimate rejection of God by the people, in another Jesus sees His impending death as the new beginning of all that God is doing in the world.

**The Judgment and Grace of God**
So having told them the story, Jesus asks the crowd the rhetorical question, 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, and who have murdered His son? And Jesus answers his own question for them, v16 'He will come and destroy those tenants.'

You see for Jerusalem and for everyone, rejecting Jesus has consequences. Using His analogy of the stone, those who reject Jesus are ultimately either broken in pieces or crushed to bits. And within 40 years, in 70AD, the Roman army had laid siege to Jerusalem, and razed it and the Temple to the ground. In other words, these tenants are in big trouble. For them and for everyone there will be a final accounting. You can't hope to spend your life rejecting God and His overtures of love to your heart for that not to destroy you on the inside and eternally.

And yet that isn't how the story ends. The story doesn't end with Jesus saying, 'He will come and destroy those tenants.' Full stop. Period. It ends with him saying, 'He will come… and give the vineyard to others.' It doesn't end with 'the builders rejected the stone.' It ends with Jesus quoting Psalm 118, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'

And through the death and resurrection of Jesus, through Him taking upon Himself at the cross the curse of rejection, the door to the gentiles has been thrown wide open so that as many as want, from every nation, can come and enter the place of blessing and promise alongside believing Jews, as fellow tenants of God's vineyard. So what Israel failed to do – to be a light to the nations, Jesus fulfilled, and made possible through the cross.

And whilst the leaders – the builders- rejected Him, God has made Jesus the cornerstone; the stone that bears the weight of two adjoining walls; and the new building of God's worldwide people, the church – Jews and Gentiles together, will be built on Him and find it's stability and strength in Him. And so far from the slaying of Jesus thwarting God's plan, it is the very means for their fulfillment: the bringing in of the nations.

So, don't you stand in trembling awe at the justice of God: justice for those who persistently reject Him and shun His patient, steadfast love? But don't you also marvel at his grace: grace towards those who don't deserve it, to the likes of you and me? That he would send His son, to die on a cross, to bring you in, that you might know His blessings and promises and purposes and will. Not so you become the owner and the universe revolves around you, but so that you can find yourself in His plans and purposes, to make His name great and live for His glory, rejoicing in His grace to you in Jesus.