

Trinity 18

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace; may I speak in the name of the God who is Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a little niece and nephew. My niece is almost three, very cute and also quite cheeky. My niece also has a stubborn streak and doesn't particularly enjoy being told what to do or not to do. My sister is trying to grow some flowers in front of their house. My niece enjoys plucking off their heads and leaves. Which she is not allowed to do. And yet, time and time again, when no one is looking she will approach the flowerbed, and do just that. And time and time again my sister will tell her no. Observing my sister parenting her children, I have learned a couple things: One, parenting can be very repetitive. And two, despite the hard work and exhausting repetitiveness of raising her children, my sister's love for them does never grow less, even when they are misbehaving and throwing tantrums.

Our gospel reading today, reminded me of God as this kind of parent. Despite God's children again and again destroying what is lovingly cared for by God, God's love never changes and never lessens.

Admittedly though, the story of my niece plucking off the heads of flowers is harmless compared to this parable and the images Jesus uses in our gospel reading today. So I think some unpacking might be needed in the face of such violent imagery.

The thing is, Jesus didn't tell this parable for us here in London in the 21st century. He told it for a group of Jewish people in Israel in the 1st century. To our 21st century London ears, this is simply an unnecessarily bloody story. Certainly, Jesus could have made his point with much less bloodshed, right? It likely sounded quite different to the ears of Jewish people in 1st century Israel. The people listening to Jesus at that time, would have heard their own story with God and God's prophets retold.

A key part of the Hebrew Scriptures, which are often called the Old Testament, are the prophets. The books of the prophets contain the words and sometimes the stories of various prophets. The prophets spoke promises, warnings and challenges to the people of Israel, as God had called them to do. And it is also recorded that there were many prophets, whose words and stories have not been written down. Repeatedly, God would call people to be prophets, to speak truth to power, to warn kings and to comfort and encourage the people of Israel in desperate times. But because these prophets often spoke uncomfortable and unwanted truths, they were rarely well received. On the contrary, being a prophet was dangerous, because the kings and high priests, those who held power in Israel, would regularly kill the prophets, if they didn't like their message.

Yet God would not give up on the people of Israel, although for about 400 years before Jesus Christ, there is no more record of prophets. God changed tactics. Instead of sending another prophet, God becomes a Jewish Rabbi, with a habit of defying expectations, speaking truth to power, challenging people and bringing good news to the poor and the oppressed.

The chief priests and pharisees, who made up the bulk of the people listening to this particular parable of Jesus, would have easily recognised in the vineyard and the murderous tenants, this part of Israel's history. They likely realised that Jesus was referring to himself with the son and that the murderous tenants were the great and powerful of Israel, including themselves. No wonder they didn't like what they were hearing. And in good keeping with the parable, their reaction is to want to arrest Jesus. They decide against it though, because they fear the crowds. Not long after this though, Jesus will be arrested and then condemned to execution on a cross. The Son of God will die. But death does not have the final word, because Jesus Christ is raised from the dead on the third day.

So, this parable of the vineyard and the tenants, who murder in cold blood the owner's messengers and his son, is not a story told for us here today.

Nonetheless, I believe there are a few important things we can learn from this parable. The people of Israel do not have a monopoly on being destructive with what God has lovingly entrusted to them. Look at how our greed is slowly but surely destroying God's good creation. Look at how we ignore and silence those, who have been and continue to warn us about climate change. Look at how we close our eyes and ears in the face of racism, poverty or gender inequality. Look at how we silence and ignore those, who call us out.

My niece plucking off the heads of flowers, despite her knowing and repeatedly being told that she shouldn't do so, is quite on brand for all of us human beings. Despite knowing better, despite being warned repeatedly, we keep doing things that are destructive. Destructive to God's good creation and destructive and hurtful to other human beings made in the image of God. And like it is mentioned in our gospel reading today, our destructive actions have consequences. God will not endlessly let us destruct what God loves and cares for.

But God's response to our destruction is not more destruction. It is making space for healing and restoration, putting an end to the vicious cycle of violence. God has not and will not give up on us. As God has shown us in the person of Jesus Christ, God wants to heal what we have broken and restore what we have destroyed. God will never give up on us. Because God is the kind of parent, who despite our bad behaviour and tantrums, will continue to love us unconditionally.

Amen.