

there was probably a reason why the early Christians used this text, and the most likely reason is that Jesus used it, as He does here.

The 'cornerstone' or 'capstone' (it is uncertain which of these from the Greek word used) was essential for building in ancient times. Any building of stone was made according to a plan and marked out according to stones which were normally cut off site. The cornerstones had to be set accurately and also cut accurately so that the remaining stones would fit when they arrived. In the building of the massive Temple complex in Jerusalem, incredible building skills were used because no stones were cut within the walls of Jerusalem. Each stone for the entire enterprise had to be cut and dressed away from the site and was expected to fit perfectly when it arrived. If it did not, it was rejected. This kind of skill was legendary, even in Jesus' day, and Jesus' accusation was that the religious authorities had made a literally 'monumental' mistake. The one true and perfect stone from which all others would take their place in the building of God's Kingdom had been removed and rejected because of the inadequacies of the authorities. In a building, such a fault would have been catastrophic. God however, would build a new building; a new Temple, the church.

Application

We are now the inheritors of God's Covenant promises, and the Kingdom of God. The history which lies behind this great parable of Jesus is now past, and Jesus Himself has been rejected by His own people, has died, and has risen again in glory to establish His Church, in which it is our privilege to take part. Is it therefore possible for us to learn from this parable? Some would say we cannot, because the parable is about the past. It does not take too much observation however, to see that many of the faults and failings within the church are similar to those of the Old Testament people of God, and in particular, God's people will sometimes not receive from the Lord what He offers them through Jesus Christ. It is possible to find churches which do not believe in Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit, for example, and one can even find 'Christians' who are cautious about accepting Jesus' gift of salvation! It is also possible to find churches which do not see any reason to connect the way they operate with the Scriptural principles which God has given for good leadership in the church. Though it may seem strange, we appear to repeat the sins of our forefathers, and sometimes those of our spiritual forefathers, the people of Israel. For this reason, the parable of the tenants in the vineyard in Mark's Gospel is worth our special attention. It warns strongly against the folly of underestimating God's claim upon our lives, both individually and as God's people, and it speaks of the need for us to remain vigilant for the Messiah, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is at work in our midst. He has been rejected too often, even in our times. There are no new answers to the human problems of sin, only those we have been given by God. All of these are accomplished through the work of Jesus, our Messiah, who is our 'cornerstone', as individuals and as the church.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Can you find a parable about life today which says something similar to what Jesus says in this parable? Can this teach us anything?
2. In what ways is Jesus killed in our midst today?
3. Look up some of the references to Jesus as the 'cornerstone' mentioned above (at the end of the first section). What do they tell us about this idea?

Discipleship

How much do you think that it cost Jesus to talk about Himself and His own persecution and death in this way? Because our Scripture passages are all beginning to focus on Jesus death and resurrection, and we are also in Lent and drawing closer to Easter, I am going to suggest a specific way of reflecting on today's passage and those we will read in the next few weeks. Find a notebook and keep a diary, as if from Jesus' perspective, of what you imagine He thought and felt in the days leading up to His death.

Final Prayer

Clean us, Heavenly Father, from the dirt and rubbish that accumulates in our lives, sometimes without our even knowing it. Give us the grace to accept this cleansing, to throw away what needs to go, and to clear away the accumulated debris of living. In this way, may we remain true to You, our Lord and our Redeemer; AMEN

Prayer

Lord God, Your mercies have touched every part of my soul.
Thank You for all You have done so that I might have the gift of peace.
Praise You for sustaining me at all times and creating new hope within me.
Glory be to You for the energy and transforming power of the Holy Spirit.
Lord God, You gave up Your Son Jesus to save and heal my soul.
Alleluia! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Streets

It is said that children do not play on the streets as they used to do. In many cities streets have become socially unsafe, and due to changes in society, children do not interact with their neighbours from an early age. Pray for your own neighbourhood and the people who live there. Ask for God's blessing on all, and a greater sense of community, particularly amongst children.

Meditation

Raise me up to give glory to You, my Lord,
Make a powerful testimony out of the whole of my life.

Give me courage to stand tall within the struggles of life,
And the nerve to refuse to be daunted by troubles.

Give me a heart to watch out for the needs of others,
And resist the temptation to put self first, before others.

Give me strength to hold firm to the faith I have found,
And apply it, in faithfulness, to all that I do.

Give me love and compassion which never runs dry,
And the ability to forgive, when affronted by sin.

Give me power to rise high above everything ordinary
And do greater things for You, seeking only the best.

Give me a hope that is real, a clear vision for the future
And the confidence that all things are completed in You.

Raise me up to give glory to You, my Lord,
May my testimony stand firm for all of my days.

Bible Study - Mark 12:1-12

¹ Jesus then began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, he put a hedge around it and dug a trough for a winepress, and erected a watchtower. He then rented the vineyard to tenant farmers and travelled to a far country. ² In due course he sent a servant to the tenant farmers to obtain from them some of the produce of the harvest. ³ But they took him, beat him and sent him away empty handed. ⁴ Again, he sent them another servant, and they beat him about the head and insulted him. ⁵ Then he sent another, and they killed him. Others were sent as well, and some they beat and some they killed. ⁶ Now, he still had one more, his dearly loved son. He sent him last of all, thinking, "They will respect my son." ⁷ But those tenants said to each other, "this is the heir; come on, let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours!" ⁸ So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ Now, what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy those tenant farmers and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this Scripture: "The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone, ¹¹ this is what the LORD has done and it is marvellous in our sight"?'

¹² They were looking for Jesus in order to arrest Him, but they feared the crowd, for they knew that He had told this parable against them. So they left Him and went away.

Review

At this tense moment in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was confronting the religious authorities about how they ran the Temple (11:15-19) and challenging what they believed about both John the Baptist and the Messiah (11:27-33). Yet in the midst of this, He told a parable! Mark only records a few parables within Jesus' general teaching ministry (in chapter 4), and it comes as something of a surprise to find Him using one now. But what a parable!

The meaning of this parable in Mark's Gospel has never been in doubt. The vineyard represents the Kingdom of God, the tenant farmers are the religious authorities, the servants are the Old Testament prophets and the 'son' is Jesus Christ. With this, the general message is as clear as anyone could wish, and not at all as difficult to interpret as some of Jesus' parables (see 4:10-12). The parable acts like another prediction of Jesus' death, but it makes it clear that this will be at the hands of the authorities, and it prompts God to act with sovereign power to re-distribute the inheritance of His Kingdom (12:9). Jesus concludes the passage with a word picture used extensively in the New Testament, describing the Messiah as the 'cornerstone', the defining 'first stone' placed in the construction of a building. Then Mark concludes the passage by painting an ironic picture of the religious authorities busying themselves by planning to arrest Jesus in fulfilment of the very parable He had just spoken against them (12:12)!

As you would expect, there is a great deal to this parable of Jesus. However, we can find out a great deal about it by comparing it with the well known prophecy of Isaiah (5:1-10) called the 'song of the vine', and also by exploring the general picture of absentee landlords in Jesus' day (see main Bible study). However, the bold way in which Jesus exposes what will happen to Him is quite remarkable. Previously, Jesus kept His identity a secret and told people not to talk about it, but once He came to Jerusalem, He was content for people to work out for themselves that He was the Messiah, that is, the 'dearly loved son' (12:6) in the middle of our text.

The structure of the parable is interesting. The first half of it is a description of what had happened in the past (12:1-6), and half of it is a prophecy of what was about to happen to Jesus in Jerusalem (12:7-8). Also, the 'dearly loved son' at the very centre of the parable is the Messiah, Jesus Himself, the one whose death would determine the future inheritance of the vineyard. Christians of the early church would therefore have read this as a clear justification from the lips of Jesus of His 'last will and testament', to pass the inheritance of the Kingdom of God over from the Jewish people to the church.

You may have noticed that at the beginning of our reading, it says 'Jesus ... began to speak to them in parables' (12:1), but although this indicates there were more parables told by Jesus, Mark only reports one. Apart from the parables in chapter 4, this is the only parable of Jesus found in the entire Gospel of Mark! It seems that Mark was fully aware that Jesus told other parables, like the ones in Matthew 21,22 and 25 about the last days of the world and God's 'Last Judgement', but Mark's Gospel is far more tightly focussed on the person and work of Jesus than Matthew's. Mark summarised much of Jesus' teaching about His own place in the Kingdom of God using the quote from Psalm 118:22,23; 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing ; it is marvellous in our eyes.'

The memorable clarity of this Old Testament Psalm means that it became one of the most important texts used by Christians in the early church. For them, it was the Scriptural proof they needed, quoted by Jesus Himself, that the church of God was the new Israel, based on the person and work of Jesus Christ (see also, Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:7, Eph 2:10, Rom 9:32).

Going Deeper

The parable itself shows signs of being more than what is normally remembered by people. If I were to tell you, before you read it, that the parable of the vineyard tenants includes multiple references to the murder of servants by the tenant farmers, you would probably be a little surprised! Mark remembered and reported this parable in a different way to Matthew (21:33-46) and Luke (20:9-19), and the differences will tell us something about what God wants us to understand from Mark's Gospel.

The origins of the parable?

In the days of Jesus, as throughout history, many local peoples under the oppression of large Empires suffered the indignities of having their lands confiscated or taken from them in war. At the time of Jesus, the people who took the lands of the people of Israel were the Romans and their allies. Now, those who captured the land did not have the time or inclination to visit and govern the vast regions their armies captured. Emperors handed out large areas of land to those they wished to favour, but they often had no particular interest in the land, apart from what money they could make from it. So it was that such 'absentee landlords' would lease out

the lands they owned, often to local tenant farmers who were the original land owners. The deal would be something like this. The landlord would leave the land alone and ask no questions providing that when they sent their representatives at harvest times, then a fixed amount of produce was handed over. The result of all this was that the landlord made a 'profit' from his ownership and the local people could earn a living as best they could in the circumstances. There is ample evidence of this being the way things worked throughout most of the agricultural regions of Israel and Galilee, and it is easy to see that this did not make for easy relationships between landlord and tenant, between Roman and Jew, and there were many tales of what would happen when things went wrong. Some of these tales began rather like Jesus' parable, but would end with the victory of the poor local landlords managing to get their land back after scurrilous, but technically legal, disinheritance of the absentee landlord.

Now, if you start with this as your understanding of the general picture of landlords who go on long journeys, and start to look closely at the parable in Mark, things become rather confusing, because the parable takes a quite different turn. Jesus began by painting a picture that was almost identical to that found in Isaiah 5, in which God prepared a vineyard in just the same way Jesus described in His parable (verse 1 - see Isaiah 5:1,2). The first shock comes at the end of verse 1 where Jesus says that the man who owned the vineyard went away on a long journey; in other words, God was like an absentee landlord! With those few words, Jesus lifted the scene right out of the Old Testament and into the contentious, first century days of Israel. Jesus had every right to point out that God was indeed Israel's 'landlord', for the Law made clear that God's people only held land on trust from God (e.g. Leviticus 25:23,24), and everything belonged to Him. Indeed, a portion ('tithe') of all produce was due to Him (e.g. Deuteronomy 14:28). In this way, Jesus drew attention to an important theme of His parable, which was the fact that the real problem within Judaism was not the just complaints of Jewish people against their Roman overlords, but the just complaints of God against His own people because they had not properly kept and looked after their Covenant inheritance!

With this charge ringing in their ears, those who heard Jesus would have been able to recognise echoes of the classic Old Testament complaint that God's people had rejected and sometimes 'killed' the prophets (see 1 Kings 18:13, 22:27, 2 Chron 24:20f., 36:15f., Neh 9:26). But what they heard next was more shocking.

The killing of the Messiah

It is possible that an original version of this story / parable may have stopped at half way through verse 5 when the third servant was sent and killed. In this form, the story anticipated the reclamation of the land by the poor local tenants, the Messiah being identified as one who came from God to help the people regain their heritage of land. But Jesus had turned the story completely on its head, and exposed the flaw in the people's expectations of a Messiah. They wanted a Messiah who would vindicate them against the Romans, but God needed to send His son as a Messiah who would claim what was rightly His, and do the work that they had failed to do. In the parable, God sends more than three servants to claim what is His (12:5), repeatedly bearing the rejection of His people as they insult and kill the servants that are sent to them. With a passion not found in Matthew and Luke's version of this parable (see Matt 21:37,38 and Luke 20:13), Mark reports Jesus' words with incredibly poignancy; 'Now, he still had one more, his dearly loved son. He sent him last of all, thinking, "They will respect my son."' (11:6) This was the Messiah!

It is obvious from the progression of the parable that Jesus was now describing His own death and the reasons for it, within the parable. The Messiah would die because the Jewish people assumed that they held the Covenant blessings (particularly of land) by right, the religious authorities wanted to control all that God had given the people of Israel over the years, and the people of Israel had placed such a barrier between themselves and the rest of the world that they were unable to witness to their God to the rest of the world.

'So they seized Him, and killed Him, and threw Him out of the vineyard' (12:8), a phrase regarded as prophetic by the early church, who equated 'out of the vineyard' with Jesus' death which took place 'outside' of the city of Jerusalem. They also believed that the direct consequence of Jesus' prophecy, 'He ... will give the vineyard to others', was the transference of God's Covenant promises from the people of Israel to the New Testament Church.

The stone rejected by the builders

The very strong connection between this passage and the early church is cemented by the reference to Psalm 118 (see above). Some commentators feel that this quote was read back into Jesus' words and placed there by Mark because they were a common 'proof text' used in the days of the early church. This cannot be proved one way or the other, but we can say that