

Reflection for Sunday 4th October (Trinity 18)

In the parable of the landowner and the tenants, Jesus gives us two images. The first is a vineyard with a fence around it as an image of the kingdom of God. This is a reflection of something that happened frequently in the history of the Hebrew people, as they repeatedly sought to isolate themselves from those around them. But God was constantly reminding them that his concern was never confined to them alone: the books of the law include many reminders to involve the foreigners around them in their festivals, and to consider their needs as well as their own. Later on, the words of the prophets forcibly reminded them that God had never been confined to one land but is Lord of the whole world. Jesus is accusing the chief priests and the Pharisees, the supposed guardians of the traditions of their people, of being small-minded and unimaginative, as well as unfaithful.

Of course, this could never happen to us, could it? Surely the church, the body of Christ, could never become so bound up in the details of its own affairs that we forget the wonder of God's mission to the whole of creation – or could it? Jesus speaks of the religious leaders making religion a burden; he calls them to put away their preoccupation with minutiae and focus on God himself. In the same way, the church can be small-minded, so bogged down in the details of religious tradition and practice that we lose the wider vision of the purposes of God – that we forget that God's love and power are active everywhere, not just in the life of the church. It's all too easy for us to fall into the trap of putting our own imaginary fence around the kingdom of God.

The second image in the parable is that of the chief priests and Pharisees thinking God had left them in charge – that they had all the answers. They had become the religious experts, the final authority on the things of God. Jesus undermined them, because he moved people far more than they ever did, spiritually, religiously and morally. Theirs is an easy position to ridicule, but it is also a frighteningly easy trap for any religious person to fall into. Perhaps we feel affronted that people are not familiar with our rituals and practices, or because they prefer to do other things than attend our services.

As we try to discover how to be true followers of Jesus in the 21st century, we need to keep in mind these two images from the parable: the ring-fencing of the church against all outside influences, and the idea that God has left us to look after it, that we have all the answers. If we do not want to become a holy anachronism, we have to avoid them both.

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