

The parable of the wicked tenants doesn't sit as well with us as it probably sat with Mark's original audience. It's based on a social structure that we would recognize as inherently flawed, and I guess Mark didn't see it, it was so unremarkable in his culture. The model is that a rich man can set up a vineyard—and probably *not* single-handedly plant it, fence it, and build the watch-tower—and then hire people to actually maintain the vineyard, essentially as sharecroppers. The landlord has the right to a big share of their produce just because he owns the land. So the way Mark has Jesus tell the story, the tenants are wicked and unjust because they keep beating up and even killing the proxies of the landlord who come to collect. And I will grant that the abuse and murder is extreme. But I can't see the landlord as a neutral actor in this drama. He set up this inherently frustrating situation, knowing that there was no way the workers could thrive or get ahead under the conditions of the lease. Then he started sending other relatively powerless people to collect for him, pitting the poor against the poor. Even after the tenants have fatally injured several of his slaves, he keeps sending proxies to collect, including finally his son. This landlord is expending a lot of lives in order to get his profits. It just seems like a poorly-designed business plan.

I do know, as I'm sure you do, that the parable is meant to be about the deficient performance of the religious authorities. At this point in the story Jesus and his disciples have entered Jerusalem. (We're delaying reading about the triumphal entry till Palm Sunday for liturgical reasons.) Jesus is not speaking to the crowds or to his disciples, but to Temple authorities, scribes and priests who are supposedly charged with the care of God's people. His parable opens with a reference to Isaiah 5, in which God planted a vineyard, built a watchtower and hewed out a wine vat and thought he'd have a terrific harvest, but instead got only wild

grapes. The religious authorities would definitely recognize the parable, and see God as the landlord, the slaves he sent to collect as the prophets, and the tenants as themselves, the putative caretakers of the people but in fact producing bad fruit because of their rejection of the prophets. Thus they realize, as Mark says, that Jesus is telling the parable against them, and they wish they could arrest him but they know it would enrage the crowd of common people, so they don't.

This parable is also problematic for reasons that are not Mark's fault, namely, the antisemitism of medieval Christianity. Generations of Christian apologists have interpreted the parable as a critique of Judaism itself, failing to bear good fruit and therefore being replaced by Christianity. That would certainly not have been the perspective of either Jesus or Mark. The critique is of religious authorities, and could apply to authorities of *any* religion. It's in no way a critique of Judaism.

But let's pass on for the moment, and look at the next episode of Jesus' adventures in Jerusalem. Now the religious authorities are irritated with him and decide to trip him up. They send some disingenuous inquirers to flatter him ("Teacher, we know that you are sincere . . . and do not regard people with partiality") and entrap him. "Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?" This is a very live question at the time of Mark's writing; the fatal revolt of Jerusalem against Rome had taken place in 70, because of the Jewish people's fundamental resistance to recognizing any power that demanded their allegiance, other than the power of God. It looks like a terrific way to trap Jesus and get him in trouble, because if he says you *should* pay taxes to the emperor, then he's showing himself to be a coward and a collaborator, but if he says you *shouldn't*, then he's setting himself up for trouble with the Romans. Jesus,

however, is too smart for them.

“Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” Jesus doesn’t have a denarius of his own; he has to ask for one. There are no Roman coins in his pockets. But somebody does have a denarius. Oh, look, it’s one of his questioners, a scribe or priest. They apparently have no problem carrying around coins of the realm, currency with the face of the emperor and words proclaiming him to be both divine and the guarantor of peace and security. I think Jesus has just changed the subject.

His answer is at one level a non-answer: Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. Whatever that means. Really, in the Roman Empire, what isn’t the emperor’s? The only way to survive is to appease the emperor and pay what you have to. But in light of the fact that Jesus had no coins and the priests did, he might be pointing out that it is actually possible *not* to participate in this Roman economy. “You’ve been benefiting from this Roman economy, so yes, you owe the emperor and you should pay taxes. But you could have resisted and abstained; you know that in reality everything belongs to God.” Or if you can’t utterly divest from the Roman economy, you can certainly choose not to leverage it to your own benefit at the expense of those whose well-being you’re responsible for.

These priests and scribes were actually probably among those well-to-do landowners who set up vineyards and collected heavy rent from their sharecropping tenants. They, not God, were the brutal landlords who exploited the desperation of the poor so as to benefit themselves. But parables being fluid things, they know they are also the sharecroppers to the Empire’s landlord. That is, the parable could be told with the Roman Empire as the landowner

and the religious authorities as the faithless tenants, posing as if they were going to deliver docile Jewish subjects to their overlords but actually secretly plotting and scheming for an opportunity to wrest back the vineyard from imperial landlord, looking forward to a day when God would restore their complete independence. Instead, Jesus may be telling them, the empire is going to destroy you because that's what empires do. You should never have agreed to play the Romans' game. Those coins were never going to make you free.

Landlord is to vineyard workers as God is to Israel. Okay, maybe. But also, landlord is to vineyard workers as chief priests and scribes are to the common people: exploiters and oppressors. And at the same time, landlord is to vineyard workers as Roman Empire is to Jewish authorities: a ruthless tyrant who will allow you some limited privilege only as long as you deliver the appropriate rent, and who will never actually give you autonomy and freedom. The priests and scribes who are anxious to entrap Jesus are themselves trapped by a system that has sucked out their souls.

Then perhaps "the stone the builders rejected" is the chance these leaders had to choose a different way, a different landlord. Thinking that they were just being realistic, they chose to throw their lot in with empire, to have the coin in their pocket....but the cornerstone is the Way of Christ who is outside or over-against the imperial system. The "rejected stone" is Christ's way and instead the religious leaders chose a way that leads to death, violence, and destruction.

Last week I attended a Des Moines city council meeting at which a coalition of members of the ACLU, NAACP, and Iowa CCI were present to speak against the adoption of an ordinance. The ordinance was in response to two years' worth of agitation to bring pretextual traffic stops

to an end, and to create some effective policies that would do away with racially biased policing. The ordinance as presented last Monday was going to be ineffectual, and we wanted to add some provisions with teeth. I've been to several council meetings for this purpose, and it is always a striking display of old-boy, pro-business, insider dealing—even by some of the more well-intentioned council members. They can just be kind of clueless, at best, and dismissive at worst.

I bring this up, though, because I think the well-intentioned city council members are a little like the chief priests and scribes who thought they were just being realistic, making their peace with the empire. The citizens of color who spoke let them know that throwing them a bone, writing a meaningless ordinance, was not going to cut it. Our friend Carla was there. She told them. A man I've never seen before brought his two teenaged kids, so they could see their dad and learn how to advocate for justice. And actually over the last two years I've seen the council begin to take the issue more seriously, as people insisted they do, as people showed up, told their stories, refused to take no for an answer. People said that progress has been made, but more progress needs to be made, and I think it will happen, because of people not resigning themselves to what they think is "realistic," but instead pushing ahead for the rejected way, the way of inclusion and dignity.

Jesus' Way is not unrealistic. It's God's very serious intention for God's beloved creation. We should not resign ourselves to soul-sucking bleakness, but claim what has been rejected as the cornerstone in which we build our foundation. Inclusion, abundance, hope: those are the fruits of the vineyard in which God invites us to work.

Son of God, you spoke words to Jerusalem's leaders that were hard to hear. Give us ears to receive your word of life so that we can follow you faithfully. Amen.