



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 4 October 2020

READINGS

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3: 4b-14; Matthew 21: 33-46

Know our heritage

I began this sermon around heritage day, and one of the Facebook groups I follow featured many pre-school children from all over the country, who, along with carefully decorated Covid masks, were wearing clothing reflecting their heritage. They were very cute, and mothers, grandmothers or whoever had gone to a lot of trouble to make the outfits beautiful, with a lot of attention to detail. What I noticed too was that a significant number of children showed a mixture of cultures, crossing between African, Asian and European clothing, all very cleverly put together, and each caption proudly describing the cultural and genetic mixture that lay behind those smiling eyes and shiny faces.

Of course we know that it isn't always so easy, and racial, national and cultural divisions do cause friction. However, we are aware of such differences, and many of us can and do find it enriching. Such diversity adds vibrancy and interest to what makes us South African. But, we often choose certain aspects of our heritage and allow it to identify us. While we may have any number of ancestors from all parts of Africa and the outside world, we choose our identity according to what we like, or what suits us at the time. Even so, knowledge of our ancestry does give us sense of where we belong. Those who are adopted are now mostly able to find their birthparents, and many do because they want to know who they are and where they come from. Almost none of us want to go back to **live** in those ancient worlds, but our roots are there, and they are important.

But there are other things that ground us too. Our Old Testament reading this morning is from the book of Exodus – the initial summary of the Law known to us as the Ten Commandments. Here we have a group of Hebrew ex-slaves, wandering around the desert after a miraculous escape from their bondage in Egypt, and they are driving Moses crazy with their complaints and their inability to get on with life. They need to be welded into a community, a nation, a called people who will do for the world what God originally designed them to do. And so God gives them the law. This law in its fullest expression encompasses everything – Who their God is, how they worship, what the priest wears and what he does what they may eat,

how it is to be prepared, what they wear, how they treat servants, foreigners, the poor, how they provide for families who are bereaved, good works and charity, the use of the land, and much more. But this Law is not just a Google search for 613 ways of living a good life. It represents a creative, fluid relationship which encompasses the whole of life which is contained within the covenant created by the God who calls us all. When Jesus said he came not to break the Law but to fulfil it, he meant it. The Law was God's gift to his people at Sinai, and was the ground upon which Jewish life has survived in the thousands of years since then, and we as children by adoption and grace are heirs of it too.

In the gospel message set for today, Jesus is talking in an environment where the people of the Law were conquered by the people of Rome with its own legal system, and society was in a state of flux as a result. The wealth and civilization of Rome came with its domination, but the price was, you become Roman in behaviour. Worship whomsoever you like, but remember, Rome is powerful and Caesar is Lord. One of the outcomes in Judea was that often a wealthy Roman would buy rural property, set up a farm or vineyard and then hire Jewish tenants to manage it while he was away fighting wars and making Caesar even more powerful. If the landlord was a good one, and mostly they were, it was a very nice living for the Jewish peasantry and went some way towards paying the taxes which were levied by the Romans. This situation Jesus' audience would have understood.

They would also have understood what Jesus was saying about the religious leaders. At this point in time, when faced with a potentially attractive Roman way of life, the religious leaders became reactively legalistic through fear that their Jewish integrity and identity would be lost without onerous policing, often with undesirable results. So Jesus used this familiar scenario to make a point. The owner of the vineyard was God. The bad tenants were the religious leaders who were using the things of God as their own possessions to keep control, and when the prophets were sent to remind them that God was the purpose and focus of their lives, they abused and killed them. And when the Son of God came, as Jesus predicted, they killed him too. Why did they so persistently misunderstand Jesus? Do **we** actually understand what he meant to do?

The Somalian archaeologist, Sada Mire who left Somalia as a refugee, was given asylum in Sweden, was educated in the UK, is now back in Somalia working as an archaeologist researching the history and culture of her land, a lot of which resonates with the modern world.

She focusses much on culture, and in Africa that is invariably a mix of the indigenous, the colonial and modern globalization. By communicating our cultural understanding and hearing others, we discover what we have in common. However culture is not static – it's always moving, growing, developing, influencing and being influenced. As time goes on, we take elements of our culture with us and we leave behind what doesn't work anymore. She maintains that culture and nationalism are not the same thing. Nationalism demands boundaries and limits and a "them and us" mindset with a fixed externally imposed identity, whereas

in the cultural sphere we recognize we all come from somewhere and that that somewhere can be enriching to everyone. She distinguishes between *knowledge* and *ownership*. If we **own** our heritage, it becomes an entrenched part of our identity and it has to dominate how we live. If however we have **knowledge** of our heritage, we approach it with a fluidity which allows us to know where it appears. We express our cultural values understand it as an approach to life, a reason why we do what we do and others do as they do, and our culture becomes a creative part of how we live and communicate and cope with the changing demands of an increasingly global world.

Now why am I bringing this in here? Two reasons. Firstly, we can see how Jesus' parable fits prevailing attitudes. It is very tempting to put ourselves all in our own little vineyard group where our practices make us think we **own** the moral high ground. We think we own Jesus and our religion and that others must see it our way. As a result the outside world doesn't really exist and can't reach us. We are afraid to speak out against the evils we see around us which leaves so many desperate to survive. Worldwide, we all treat governments as benevolent parents instead of holding them to account, and don't care enough about how our taxes are used or misused. As long as we can live as we choose. Any criticism makes us feel really threatened and we find a way of getting rid of those who "don't fit." We can't deal with what makes us uncomfortable. Nice charities we support look after the poor so we are doing our bit, but we don't hold them accountable either. We are like the tenants in the vineyard – silence the prophets so we can carry on as usual and keep what we have safe. How then, does Jesus influence us in living with the adaptations demanded by a changing world?

Secondly, not unrelated to the above, in our little church vineyards we see our religion as a refuge and not as a way of life. For too many Christians, what we do on Sunday is to make us feel better – Jesus loves us, and we sing hymns and songs (in non-Covid times), get fed the Eucharist and if we have faith, the bad stuff in our lives will all go away. It makes us feel so much better. If we don't like the ethos, we gossip in the parking lot and ultimately go somewhere else where we are made to feel better – "Where we are fed", as we put it. . This is not wrong, and being without church for so long, we really miss the Sunday ritual. But is that all? Aren't we in danger of **owning** our God and limiting God within the boundaries of what we want? Is there no place for risking our safety in spreading a Gospel in world which has largely forgotten it?

Jesus called himself the cornerstone which the builders rejected. In a building, a cornerstone was a very large, square block which was placed on the corner of the foundation so that the walls on each side would line up at 90 degrees and the builders would have a reliable starting place and guide as to where subsequently to place the bricks to keep the walls straight and make the building stable and strong. The foundations of our spiritual lives are the Law and our commitment to the things of God. Jesus is the cornerstone on this foundation. He guides us within the Godly world we belong to, and we are the builders of the Kingdom guided by a cornerstone which those who want to own and define God, often reject. Let us keep our eyes on the cornerstone, and build lives, churches, communities and countries which bring peace, stability

and security in line with it. We are called to be responsible tenants of this vineyard, and be a real presence in a world which needs the fruit we produce. After all, the little sweetie-pies in our pre-schools who wear their heritage clothes so proudly, are surely worth having us leave for them a strong, truth-fearing, prophetic church, a safe, secure country, and a godly people whose example tells them, “this is what Jesus must have been like”. Let’s make sure they will want to be like him too, in the fullest sense of the word.