

The Absence, Patience and Judgement of God

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St Luke 20:9-19

The parable we are to look at this evening describes a landowner who plants a vineyard, and then leaves it to others to tend the vines and harvest the grapes. When he sends his servants to collect the rent or its equivalent, they are abused and return empty handed. Then he sends his son, who is thrown out of the vineyard and murdered. So the landowner returns and destroys the tenants and gives the land to others.

If the Dean had asked me to choose a parable, this one would not have been high up the list. It can hardly be described as a “top of the pops” parable. If we were to take a poll, my guess is that parables like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan would be both the most popular, as well as the best known. But in the 1st Century it was different. This parable is the only one which is mentioned in the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and all roughly in the same context, though with some differences in the text. And there is yet another testimony. In 1945 some Egyptian farmers looking for fertiliser in the ruins of the cemetery at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt discovered a jar containing papyri amongst which was the Gospel of Thomas. In this Gospel can be found this same parable in a slightly shortened form.

In passing it might be worth reflecting on why this parable, regarded as so important in the 1st century should be treated so differently in the 21st Century. The reason may be that it raises difficult issues, rather than presenting easy answers. It refers to the apparent absence of God, rather than His presence, - a topic much preferred in our generation. Even more relevant, it deals with the judgement rather than the salvation of God. Helmut Thielicke points out in his book *The waiting Father* that all the parables of Jesus dealing with nature breathe peace, safety and order, but “wherever man occupies the centre there is always an element of dramatic tension, conflict, doom, and downfall”, of which this parable is an apt example. God is not seen as the kind Shepherd, the good

Samaritan or the forgiving Father, but as our Judge, and the judgement of man is not today exactly flavour of the month.

This parable shines light for us on three aspects of God – His apparent absence, his patience and his judgement.

The “absence” of God

We are told that the owner of the vineyard “went to another country for a long time”. This was a frequent practice in the Middle East in those days. Landowners did not like to get their hands dirty. In Christ’s day, as the theologian Jeremias points out, a large section of this part of the Middle East was in the hands of foreigners.

So here we see an emphasis on absence, rather than presence. The Greek word in the text is *apodemia*. We can even, as C.H.Dodd points out, see God here as an alien. This parable is an interesting contrast to the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that Parable it is the son who goes into the far country, whereas in this one it is the Father who absents himself “for a long time”.

I have said the *apparent* absence of God because theologically it is impossible ever to imagine God as absent. God is always present, everywhere and at all times. But it certainly is possible to suggest an *apparent* absence, or an absence which springs from human failure. H B Swete, a former Professor of Divinity here in Cambridge, in his book on the Parables, writes of this absence that “it represents the distance which actually existed between the religious leaders of Israel and the God of Israel, a distance which seemed to them to be the result of His withdrawal into the furthest heaven, but which was in truth due to their own withdrawal from him. The absence which was really theirs, seemed to them to be God’s; they thought Him far off from them because they were in fact far off from Him.”

If we are thinking of this “absence” or “presence” in terms of human experience, we need to be careful. The seeming absence may be what some have called “the dark night of the soul”, something to be endured prayerfully, yet resolutely, knowing that in time night will turn to day. But it may also be as Professor Swete describes it – an absence because of our failures – our prayerlessness, our unbelief or our rebellion.

The Patience of God

The second image we get from this parable is of a *patient* landowner. He does not retaliate at the first whiff of rebellion. Having sent one servant, he sends another and yet another, and only then sends his beloved son. We need to be careful not to look at parables factually, but in many details as figurative accounts. God is by no means limited in his patience to three servants. In the accounts in the Old Testament He was constantly sending leaders and prophets to draw His people back to Himself. The parable merely underlines the patience of the landowner in the face of constant rebuffs.

Helmut Thielicke asks the question, where would one ever find a person so long-suffering, especially in the Middle Eastern context? He sees the purpose of the parable as illustrating what he calls God's "incomprehensible" concern for man, "the lengths God will go to keep on man's track and maintain contact with him despite his stubbornness and his blind delusion. We may behave as madly and pigheadedly as we will, and yet God's faithfulness is greater than our folly. We may play dead like a dog and treat God as if he did not exist, we may be blasé and ignore him, but God still sticks to us and will not let us out of his sight."

The same writer describes this parable as "the secret of the gospel in human terms". The gospel is the message of the divine initiative; it is the venturing of a new beginning, a fresh start in the midst of human chaos and degradation. God takes the initiative. He sends his servants over and over again. But supremely He sends his Son. It is the message of the faithfulness and patience of God – pressing past our feeble excuses and human posturings to the divine answer in His Son Jesus Christ.

We are really here talking of forgiveness – God's readiness to forgive, which is grounded and implemented in His initiatives. But it is intended to be part of the human scene also. In both the Lord's Prayer, and other teaching, Christ linked the two together. In fact He made it clear that the divine forgiveness was contingent on the human acts of forgiveness. The war against terrorism will never succeed by force alone. Forgiveness needs to be part of the answer also. The way of forgiveness is God's road map for us all.

The Judgement of God

Clearly this parable was spoken by Christ against the Jewish leaders of his day. They were deeply offended by the thought that the vineyard of Israel is to be given to others. "Heaven forbid" they cry – an exclamation which – other than in Paul's writings, is only to be found here. Christ

then speaks of the judgement coming upon them, and of the stone which is going to crush them.

This is one of the texts which some would like to remove from the New Testament because of its anti-Semitic overtones. But such an accusation is only justified if applied *only* to Jews. It should be applied to the whole of humanity. H B Swete discusses this in his book on the Parables. He writes, “no people, no nation or Church, has any permanent right to the Vineyard of God. It is in possession of the vineyard for only so long as it renders the fruits to the owner. When this ceases to be done the Vineyard will pass to other farmers”

When we study a passage like this we sometimes miss important nuances because of the vagaries of modern translations, and the difficulties of understanding the culture from which the words have come.

In verse 13 of this passage, when the landowner describes the sending of His Son, the modern Revised Standard Version translates it “what shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him”. In all Syriac and Arabic versions it is translated “it may be they will feel shame before men”. The importance of the concept of shame in the East is partially indicated in that there are special words for “shame” and “sense of shame”.

In passing I would stress the urgent importance in the current conflict in the Middle East of a sensitive understanding of the clash of cultures between the East and the West.

Two key books on the Parables of Luke have been written by Kenneth Bailey, and are called *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*. The author has lived for over twenty years in the Middle East, and so understands the cultural implications of texts like this.

Kenneth Bailey writes this about the culture out of which this Parable originally came. “Middle Eastern Culture is a shame-pride culture, ie. a particular pattern of social behaviour which is encouraged by appeals to shame.” In the Middle East the parent does not tell the child “that is wrong Johnny” – with an appeal to a standard of right and wrong; but “that is shameful Johnny” with an appeal to feelings of shame or of pride. One of the sharpest criticisms in the Middle East is *mia jikhtashi*, which literally means “he does not feel shame.”

One finds the same sentiments in the Prophet Jeremiah. He prophesies that “the wise men shall be put to shame” (Jer 8:9), and of the false prophets and priests he asks the question “were they ashamed when they committed abominations? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush” (Jer 8:12).

This adds enormously to the importance and relevance of this Parable to our day, because we live in a society which is increasingly losing its sense of shame, or in the words of Jeremiah, “does not know how to blush”. In 1999 the well known journalist and TV personality John Humphrys wrote a book called *Devil’s Advocate*. One chapter of the book was devoted to this same subject – shame. He exposes the absence of shame in our national life. He wrote, “self-justification is usually the message: you are the victim or you are making a claim of absolute right to pursue your own selfish interest. That’s why it always seems so shameless, because it literally is. Self-justification is the antithesis of shame, and self-justification before millions is shamelessness with knobs on”.

But self-justification is not only a form of shamelessness, it is also a rejection of the judgement of God, which is the crowning message of this Parable. We live in a society suffering from a kind of schizophrenia. On the one hand there can be strong condemnation of any form of criticism or judgement, while on the other there is a national disease of judging others, of which members of the Royal Family are obvious victims at the present time.

In our society there can be a strict code of morality asserted in certain areas, often neglected in the past. One could quote racism, sexism and anti-semitism as examples. But people’s sense of shame falls far short in other areas, of which the most important and serious is the rejection of Christ, the One who, like the son in this Parable, was sent by the Father to bring us back to God.

But the bad news that this Parable ends with – the judgement and the punishment of those who have rejected the advances of the landowner - needs to be seen in a fresh light. The late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom draws our attention to this in a meditation he once wrote on this Parable. He says quite starkly, “we proclaim judgement as *good news*”. He goes on to quote various verses such as “lift up your heads for your deliverance is nigh” (Luke 21:28). He also quotes from the prayer of a young man, “I love you, Lord; if your victory means my destruction, let me perish, but may your victory come!”.

Another young man, a student in Korea, whom I have known since he was a child, e mailed me recently about his new delight in Requiems. He comments on the Mozart Requiem, “it is really admirable, grand, pleasant, thrilling. . . especially when it comes to the *Dies Irae*, the wrath of God and *Tuba Mirum* part. I love the soloist’s warm voice. When the baritone sings *Tuba Mirum* it is a bit awkward that he is singing the very last judgement, but the melody is so calm and warm.” So Mozart did not seem to see the judgement of God as all “gloom and doom”.

Yes, the judgement is good news. It is something we can and should welcome. It will be the complete vindication of Christ. It will be the final overthrow of all his enemies, of which the last is death itself. It will be the end of pain, sickness, poverty and all forms of inequality and injustice. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.

And God, who may seem to some of us as absent and uncaring, will close the gap of time and space, and be present with us in all his glory and love. Surely for that we can all cry, “Amen, come, Lord Jesus”.

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