

The Christ Conscience
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Scriptures:

Matthew 21:33-46 (RSV)

³³ Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

⁴² Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone; (keystone)
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?

⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' (*Other ancient authorities lack verse 44*)

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon:

In Matthew's Gospel, the author never gives his readers a clear insight into why Jesus went to Jerusalem, but assumes the reader and his audience know. Given that Jesus understood he was called by God to address the same apostasies and abuses that were prevalent in the eight-century by the prophets Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, it only makes sense that he would need to go to the heart of Israel's religion, the source of its lapses - Jerusalem.

As in the days of old, especially during times of prolonged prosperity, the ruling elite fostered practices and social conditions that benefited them at the expense of those less powerful and prominent. Some of the elite and wealthy even tried to alter divine, kinship relationships for their benefit as we see in Jesus' condemnation of their making vows that neglected or victimized parents, contrary to the fifth commandment. Often the elites turned their worship of God into occasions of public self-aggrandizement and honorific, one-upmanship as Jesus points out earlier in Matthew 23:6.

Over the years, the ruling elite had also incorporated and maintained certain aspects of pagan religions into the worship of God. Therefore, right before Jesus' and other's eyes, the holy ways of covenant had been and were eroding. Jesus evidently believed that the prophet

Isaiah's insights and assessment of things in his day paralleled much in Jesus' time. Let me share Isaiah's insight:

⁷I have given you the story of God's people. They are the vineyard that I spoke about. Israel and Judah are his pleasant acreage! He expected them to yield a crop of justice but found bloodshed instead. He expected righteousness, but the cries of deep oppression met his ears. ⁸You buy up property so others have no place to live. Your homes are built on great estates so you can be alone in the midst of the earth! ⁹But the Lord Almighty has sworn your awful fate—with my own ears I heard him say, "Many a beautiful home will lie deserted, their owners killed or gone. ¹⁰An acre of vineyard will not produce a gallon of juice! Ten bushels of seed will yield a one-bushel crop!" (Isaiah 5: 7-10)

Such conditions could not be allowed to continue; the people and their leaders must be confronted, warned, and made to review the patterns of Israel's history and the consequences for such lapses and abuses. Thus, John the Baptist and Jesus, holy men of God, came on the scene from seemingly out of nowhere, proclaiming a message of repentance and preparation because God was again marshalling the forces of heaven and earth to address the people's apostasy and to bring judgment.

Today, we see in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus, this nobody from Galilee, who had acquired quite an honor standing and following among the common folk, confronting and condemning some of the community leaders and the temple priest in Jerusalem. Jesus challenged these people by way of an allegory, which he rarely uses in his teachings, drawn from Isaiah chapter 5. As we know, an allegory uses one set of images, characters, or events to represent other things and often express deeper meanings than alleged.

Little did these learned and powerful men suspect, when they publicly challenged this country bumpkin from Galilee, that he possessed the acumen to use the words of the great prophet Isaiah to condemn and humiliate them in the eyes of the people.

Jesus' opening salvo declared that even the lowest of the low - tax collectors and prostitutes, listened to John the Baptist and repented, but not so these wise and learned sinners. To highlight this point and the repercussions of these leaders' failing to believe John and now Jesus, we hear this story today.

We hear about another landowner, whom the elders and priest most likely would have identified with because some of them may have been landowners, even absentee landowners. However, the people would have automatically despised the landowner in this parable as they did many of their leaders. The landowner is obviously an absentee landowner, who established a vineyard solely as a commercial endeavor. Such landowners often forced people to grow cash crops on every inch of arable land at the expense of space for the peasants to grow subsistence crops or crops to barter in the marketplace. Such landowners leased out these enterprises to clients to farm and manage; and thereby distanced themselves from any intrinsic connection to the land, its sacredness, its produce, and its producers.

Come first harvest and pressing time, the culmination of a lot of work over possibly a year or two, there would have been great joy and celebration for the coming of the new wine. The landowner sent his slaves, his representatives, to collect his portion of the production. The landowner's portion would have ranged anywhere from a quarter to a half, leaving the tenants to cover their expenses out of their portions.

Well, the tenants decided not to hand over the produce this time. They set about violating one of the most sacred of relationships in the Ancient Near East - the patron-client relationship, which was also the model for people understanding their relationship to the gods or

God. In short, the victimized become the victimizers. You can just hear the people's thoughts - right on, right on United Grape Workers and Wine Producers of Palestine!

The tenants beat one slave, killed another, and stoned another. The landowner sent another larger group of slaves and the same things happened to them. Finally, the landowner sent his son, the same as the landowner himself showing up. The tenants seeing the landowner's son made the false assumption that the landowner must be dead because his son, the heir, was there. They promptly grabbed the son, took him outside the vineyard to kill him so as not to contaminate the land with human blood. Now, they had it all. No longer would the workers be alienated from their efforts or the fruits of their labors because there was no one left to demand or inherit. Hip, Hip hurrah! for the United Grape Pickers and Wine Producers of Palestine; they done beat down the man.

Jesus asked these elites, some of whom, as I said, may have been absentee landowners themselves, what they thought would happen to the tenants when the "not dead" landowner showed up. These privileged, ruling elite responded, partly out of a sense outrage at the injustice of it all, but partly out the violation of sacred customs that benefited them and their kind and their so-called divine right to rule, to prosper, and to own without considering the consequences to others less fortunate. As much as the people may have appreciated the story, it would have also upset their sense of the world too. These leaders told Jesus the landowner was going to kill the whole lot of them, which would have been the proper response to such a rebellious and deadly uprising. Thereafter, he would give the management of his vineyard over to more loyal and compliant clients.

In view of the elite's reply, Jesus closed the trap by quoting from Psalm 118, believed to be a sacred song of celebration and thanksgiving for God reestablishing the people as the cornerstone of God's presence among the nations, after seemingly rejecting them in the Egyptian and Babylonian events. However, I think we should hear Matthew alluding to the Judean leadership's rejecting John and Jesus, the One who sent them, and their message as either the cornerstone upon which God will now align the coming kingdom or as the keystone, the central stone at the top of an arch, that locks the whole structure in place.

Jesus then unloaded on these Jewish leaders, representative of all such apostate leaders. Jesus said plainly, God will dispossess them and their kind as leaders in the kingdom of heaven to come because of their lapses and abuses. The kingdom and its management would be handed over to others, people who would produce the fruits of the kingdom - justice, compassion, morality, ethicalness, and right worship.

Thus, I summarize the allegory: The owner of the vineyard is God, the tenant farmers are the Jewish people, the fruit is righteousness, the slaves sent to collect are the prophets, and Jesus is the heir.

Matthew believed that he and his Jesus-community were the new client-tenants with Jesus, the Son of God, as the aligning cornerstone or keystone in God's latest endeavor to bless all the people of earth through the Israelites. Therefore, it seems for Matthew, that the true Israel is now more than just an ethnic identification for a highly observant group of Abraham's descendants, but a larger spiritual community of people, who live their life in God by the Ways of Jesus. The Ways of Jesus are living by the spirit of Torah or the Law but not necessarily by its letter, human additions, and amplifications, especially wherein such things violate the spirit. A life lived in the spirit of the Law is characterized by justice, compassion, and love for God and loyal care and concern for others.

These elders and temple priest were so outraged that they wanted to arrest and kill Jesus, this up-start, nobody from Galilee, who had presumed well beyond his station and bested them in their own venue by out-maneuvering them in the court of public opinion. However, they

feared the people, so they didn't do it yet. Now, adding to their dishonor in the eyes of the ancient near easterner, they plotted their ultimate shame in a last resort to violence. These leaders would bide their time for the right opportunity to seize and kill Jesus.

In Jesus' reference from Isaiah, the reader of Isaiah was asked to judge between God and God's divine efforts and an ungrateful and rebellious people. Jesus asked the elders and priests and, concomitantly, the people to judge between the rebellious tenants and the absentee landowner's case. However, I would submit to you that there is another demand for judgment implied in these passages of scriptures; that being: has Christianity, in its presumptiveness as the new tenants of God's vineyard, done any better in giving to God, God's rightful produce?

As we read the history of the Christian faith, it is discouraging to see that we have made the same, if not worse mistakes than our Jewish, Jesus-believer forbearers. It is discouraging to see how many American Christians - citizens of the most powerful and blessed nation in human history - have become more concerned with their personal affluence, acquisitions, comfort, and security than they are with social, political, and judiciary justice, charity, and personal and corporate morality. Emerging trends in American values and lifestyles and the caliber of corporate, religious, and political leadership in this nation show a similar pattern of social and moral turpitude to that of Jesus' day.

Has Christianity and its leadership been any better than ancient Judaism and its leadership in producing the fruits of the Kingdom of Heaven? Is there more justice and compassion in the world today than in Jesus' day? Are there fewer victimized and oppressed people than when Jesus denounced much of what he saw in Jerusalem-Judaism of his time? Is our nation, which claims "In God We Trust," any more interested in using its influence and resources for the good of others in the world than were the ancient Jews and Jewish leadership? Do we strive to produce the fruits of the Kingdom of Heaven in our personal lives, in the communities we live in, or our nation?

Contrary to the anti-American and anti-Christian sentiments that seem so popular today, I would answer these questions with a resounding yes! The world and its people are far better off because of a pervasive Christian moral and ethical consciousness that undergirds and informs the mindsets of many people in the Western world, even though they may not acknowledge it as such. A consciousness and a conscience that has often been repentant and self-correcting in its own abuses and failures. The Borgen Project, a nonprofit political advocacy organization, which addresses poverty and hunger issues around the world, gives some very interesting and hopeful statistics, regarding the decline in world hunger and the progress in world health issues in recent years.¹

To this, let me remind us that in Jesus' culture, there were no distinctions between politics, religion, economics, and family; they were simply different aspects of a person being in the world. Also, Jesus saw the correlations between hungry, diseased bodies, social, political and religious oppression and a person's receptivity to the Gospel. Jesus' entire ministry was aimed at calling people to repent - effect a true moral and spiritual relationship to God through a true moral and spiritual relationship to one another, neighbor, and even those who oppose them as preambles to the kingdom. Jesus' ministry, ipso facto, confronted oppressive and marginalizing religious, social, familial, economic, and political structures of his day with the message to repent, turn around, embrace the Gospel of God's righteousness, compassion, and love and, it got him killed. *(If he had stayed at home, kept his ideas and viewpoints to himself, the Jerusalem leadership would not have had a reason or the occasion to have him killed.)*

¹ <https://borgenproject.org/victories-fighting-poverty/>

Therefore, I reiterate that Christianity and the Christian consciousness has had a far greater and a more positive net impact on the world than a negative one to date. However, there is still much that needs to be done. I would tell all those anti-Christian fatalists and antagonists to get a life, check out the facts, check out America's contributions to a better world, and stop listening to the self-serving and un-reflected upon propaganda of their own kind.

However, listen to some earlier words of Jesus to his disciples:

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Matthew 9:37-38 (NRSV)

In summation, God needs each person, possessed of the Holy Spirit, to respond to the Lord of the Harvest within their own means and abilities. So, no matter who we are, how old or young we are, our financial state, etc., we must stand ready to go and to be used. The Holy Spirit is not unreasonable and will work within our physical, financial, and social limitations to add our contributions to God's holy kingdom coming on earth, if we will allow it.

Lest we be too complacent and self-satisfied, I want to point out that Jesus in Matthew's Gospel condemned the leaders of the religious-political-economic-familial establishment of his day, their compromises, accommodations, apostasy, and the mindset of many of the people as being the provocation for the coming judgment. Matthew and many in his community of faith would have seen the destruction of much of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Judean Israelites, among whom there would have been many of the elites, as God's judgment on the religious establishment, its apostasy, people's indifference, and the crucifixion of Jesus.

I must confess that I have these moments when I think I see much of mainstream, western Christianity and its various manifestations, like ancient Jerusalem-Judaism, as being co-opted by a culture of prosperity, power, and elitism as opposed to standing up as the Christ conscience and the voice of holy critique. What do you think? What do you think we can do about it?

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