God’s beloved Son is sent to a fruitless vineyard

Text: Mark 11:27-12:12

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 5:1-7; Mark 11.27-12.12

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 359, 366, 80, 118b, 525

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#39)

**Theme:** The chief priests, scribes and elders challenge the authority of Jesus and He explains His identity as the beloved Son of God using a parable of a vineyard leased to defiant tenants.

**Proposition**: Respect Jesus, the beloved Son of God.

**Introduction**

Who is Jesus? This is the key question that Mark’s gospel answers. About half way through, in chapter 8 Peter declares, on behalf of himself and the other disciples ‘*you are the Christ*’ (8:29). When Jesus enters Jerusalem, the crowds shout “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!*” (11:9-10). Jesus was widely welcomed as the promised Messiah. Now, in our text, Jesus likens Himself the beloved son of a vineyard owner and also cites a psalm that celebrates the victory of the enthroned Messiah.

As Mark’s gospel continues to unfold, the identity of Jesus is becoming clearer. He is the One who calls His disciples to follow Him. He is the One with power to heal the sick. He is the One who the unclean spirits rightly identify as ‘the Son of God’ (3:11). He is the One who has authority to command this creation (4:35-41). He is the One who was gloriously transfigured before Elijah, Moses, Peter, James and John and a voice from an overshadowing cloud says, “*This is my beloved Son*” (9:7).

Now, in our text, He is the One who refuses to directly answer a challenging question from the Jewish religious authorities who controlled the Temple. Instead, He tells a parable about a vineyard and the defiant tenants who have not been productive, but instead have mistreated and killed the owner’s representatives when they have rightfully come for some fruit from the vineyard. In this simple earthly story with a heavenly meaning Jesus masterfully both identifies Himself, and also predicts his own future. In addition He foretells the future for unfruitful Israel and also for those who will be given the blessing of being able to live in the Lord’s vineyard. Let’s look at this revealing passage of Scripture under three points this morning:

1. A challenging question
2. A personal revelation
3. A fearsome and wonderful future
4. **A challenging question**

Imagine the fellowship area of this building before a morning service like this one. People are sitting round tables, enjoying the company of others whilst they chat and sip their cups of coffee. Then someone comes in and starts overturning tables and chairs and taking coffee cups away from people and pouring the contents down the kitchen sink. Then they go outside and block the driveway, preventing others from driving past the building to park. After all this commotion and disruption, you can perhaps guess what would happen next. This individual would be approached by the Session, the Elders and the Deacons, and maybe even some from the Committee of Management (COM) who take care of these premises. This group might then ask the person ‘*who gave you the authority to do what you have done?*’ – probably with the implication that because this person was not an elder, deacon or COM member they had no right to do what they had done in the church building.

There are many differences between this illustration and what happened in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago when Jesus ‘cleansed’ the temple there of moneychangers and merchants. However, the challenging question about authority is exactly the one put to Jesus the day after He had disrupted the activities in the court of the Gentiles. Mark records the question in our text (Mark 11:28) “*By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?*”

Just like the elders, deacons and COM are responsible for what takes place in this building, so the Jewish council, called the Sanhedrin, had authority over activities in the temple. The appointed members of the Sanhedrin were chief priests, scribes and elders. When they refer to Jesus ‘doing these things’ they certainly have at least the temple cleansing in view, and may well have included also the astonished response of the crowds to His teaching (11:18) and His entry into Jerusalem two days before. The chief priests, scribes and elders were effectively asking Jesus to ‘show us your credentials’.

It was a custom amongst Jewish Rabbis, especially when debating one another that they would respond to a question with another question. This is what Jesus did, replying to them “*I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.*” (v29-30). It’s worth remembering that the ‘*Jews (had earlier) sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem*’ to ask John the Baptist the key identity question ‘who are you?’ (John 1:19).

John, like Jesus, was not authorized by the Jewish religious leaders. John the Baptist identified himself as being the fulfilment of the Lord’s prophesy through Isaiah “*the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight’ the way of the Lord*” (John 1:23). However, it is clear from our text that the Jewish religious authorities did not believe that John the Baptist had being sent directly from God as His mouthpiece. John had a high public profile and widespread recognition as a devout prophet of God during his ministry and it seems that the Jewish authorities were unsure quite how to respond to him. As far as we know they did not protest against his arrest by Herod Antipas when John rightly rebuked him over his sin in taking his brother’s wife.

When Jesus asked the question ‘*Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?’* Mark records that ‘*they discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But shall we say, ‘From man’? – they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet*’ (v31-32). Today we might say that as a result of the masterfully worded question that Jesus put to them, the chief priests, scribes and elders were ‘*caught between a rock and a hard place*’. Or to use chess terminology, it was ‘check mate’ for them! So the highest religious authorities in Israel, weakly replied “*We do not know*”. The Sanhedrin had confronted Jesus in a public area in the Temple (v27). I can only imagine how embarrassing their response must have been both to them and to those listening closely to the question and answer interaction between the Sanhedrin and Jesus.

In response to their reply Jesus said to them: “*Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things*.” It sounded as though Jesus was not going to tell them the source of His authority, but in fact He about do to so, using a very pointed parable, as we’ll see in our next two points, firstly:

1. **A personal revelation**

Currently in New Zealand, and in other parts of the world, landlords and tenants are often in the news. There are some unscrupulous property owners who do not provide well-maintained homes and there are some irresponsible tenants who cause wilful damage and do not pay their rent on time. Landlords and tenants are nothing new. In 1st century Israel there were large, landed estates with absentee-owners. Tenant farmers cultivated land which did not belong to them. They had responsibilities to care for the fields and equipment and to work faithfully to produce crops.

When Jesus started speaking to the Sanhedrin using a parable his listeners would have been very familiar with the situation he described. ‘*A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country*’ (12:1). Why does Jesus choose a vineyard, rather than perhaps an olive grove or an area of sheep grazing country for this parable? The reason is that in the Old Testament, Israel is likened to a vineyard (Psalm 80:8-19; Isaiah 5:1-7).

We heard earlier from Isaiah 5 that the Lord planted choice vines on a very fertile hill, building a watchtower to protect the crop and a wine vat to store the processed produce. The leased property was set up for fruitfulness, but the owner ‘*looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes*’ (Isa 5:2). As a result the Lord prophesied that He would remove the protective hedge and walls around His vineyard and that He would destroy it. The ruling Jewish religious elite did not know how to answer Jesus about the source of John the Baptist’s authority, but they did know that the parable Jesus was using to teach them was about Israel, the Lord’s vineyard and their roles in it.

As Jesus continues, He describes how the vineyard owner sent one of his servants to receive from his tenants some of the fruit. Instead of giving what was rightfully expected of them, these wicked tenants beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. So the vineyard owner tried again, sending another servant. This one was treated more severely than the first by the defiant tenants ‘*they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully*’ (v4). As so often happens with unchecked patterns of sinful behaviour in the lives of individuals and nations, evil escalated. Jesus continues with the parable: “*And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed*” (v5).

These tenants had found a solution to avoiding their rent payments – just get rid of the debt collectors!

Jesus then reveals the final messenger that the vineyard owner sends: “*He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’*” (v6) The Greek word here translated ‘respect’ is interesting. In the active form it contains the idea of shame – to make ashamed, but here in the passive form it means ’*to be shamed into respect*’. So, in the parable, the vineyard owner hopes that the wicked tenants who have mistreated and killed so many of his servants in the past would be shamed by their previous evil actions into respecting his dear son.

In this parable Jesus is actually answering the challenging question put to him by the Jewish Sanhedrin: “*By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?*” Like the beloved son in the parable, Jesus has been sent to God’s people Israel – God’s vineyard – with divine authority. He is the representative of the Lord, the covenant God of Israel. He is the Son by whom God speaks (Heb 1:2). He is the last and greatest of all the prophets, the Son whom God appointed the heir of all things (Heb 1:2).

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3). This is Jesus the divine Son of God in whom His Heavenly Father is well pleased (Mark 1:11). This is the Messiah, the Christ, who has entered Jerusalem with the full authority of the Lord God. This is the Divine Disrupter of the corrupt temple who astonished the crowd with His teaching. In this parable, Jesus makes a personal revelation that would have been unmistakable to the learned Jews, the chief priests, scribes and elders. Everything He had done and said in His public ministry pointed to the reality that He had been sent by God and He came to Israel looking for the fruit of faith in the lives of God’s covenant people.

Notice in verse 12 that Mark records the response of the Jewish religious leaders to Jesus’ answer to their question. “*And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away*”. They didn’t believe Jesus to be the beloved Son of God. Instead of respecting Him out of shame for their own lack of spiritual fruit they disrespected Him and sought to arrest him so that they could get rid of Him.

How do you respond when Jesus, through His living Word accompanied by the convicting Holy Spirit shows you a lack of spiritual fruit in different aspects of your life? Perhaps a lack of some of the fruits of the Spirit ‘*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and/or self-control*’ (Gal 5:22). Do you accept Him as the beloved Son of God your Saviour who died for your lack of spiritual fruit and who enables you to produce fruit in your life as you trust in Him and remain in Him like a living branch connected to a living vine (John 15:1-5)? Or do you disrespect Him by perhaps secretly wishing that you could silence His voice in your life so that you can avoid the call to repentance, faith and gospel transformation?

Maybe you have, over time, come to sit under God’s Word preached less often? Is your pattern of private Bible reading and prayer less frequent than in the past? Have you stopped attending a Bible study group during the week? Receive Jesus into your life today as the Beloved Son of God, sent by the Father for your salvation.

Coming back to our text; the Jewish religious leaders were like the wicked tenants in the parable and Jesus predicted both their coming destruction and His own death and victory, which brings us to our third point:

1. **A fearsome and wonderful future**

You may know that this past week there was a plane crash in Russia that was widely reported in the media. The leader of the mercenary Wagner group Yevgeny Prigozhin was listed as one of the dead passengers. Many suggest that Mr Prigozhin has been eliminated because he recently threatened the power of Vladimir Putin, the dominant president of Russia. Ensuring the death of people who pose a threat to established power structures is sadly nothing in world history and it is what Jesus describes in the parable of the defiant tenants.

Realising that the vineyard owner has sent his own beloved son, they say to one another “*'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard*” (v7-8). Within this powerful parable, Jesus predicted His own violent death at the instigation of the spiritually fruitless Jews. But it doesn’t end there. Jesus asks the question “*What will the owner of the vineyard do?*” (v9) Then He gives the answer “*He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others*”. The Greek word translated ‘destroy’ does not mean ‘to cease to exist’ but rather the complete loss of well-being. That is the essence of complete eternal separation from God. This is the judgement of God on the spiritually unfruitful – Hell.

Whilst the vineyard owner may have seemed weak and powerless as he sent messenger after messenger to bring back fruit, instead this was a sign of his great patience. The Apostle Peter writes of this long-suffering grace of the Lord in these words: “*The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed*” (2 Pet 3:9-10). Be careful here. Do not misinterpret the Lord’s patience as a reason to be spiritually unfruitful in your life.

Having prophesied His own execution and God’s judgement on unbelieving Israel, Jesus then speaks of His coming resurrection and of the new Israel who will inherit the Kingdom of God. He does this by quoting from Psalm 118:22-23 “‘*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’?*”. Jesus is the ‘stone’ that some people, like the Jewish chief priests, scribes and elders stumble over.

Jesus shames people like us by showing us what true holiness looks like. Perfect godliness looks like the image of God in the man Jesus Christ. By His Spirit, He shows us our faults, our failure, and our sins. His Word shines in the darkness of our hearts and reveals where spiritual fruit is lacking. We then have the choice either to reject Him, not wanting His presence in our lives or to be shamed by our spiritual fruitlessness into respecting, reverencing, and worshipping Him as our Lord and Saviour.

He is the cornerstone, the foundation upon which His church is built (Eph 2:20). He invites all who will listen to His voice today to come to Him. To come and be part of the New Israel; the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29). To receive gracious gifts in Him – not a physical vineyard, but ‘*the riches of his glorious inheritance*’ (Eph 1:19), both now and in the future. In this life we can be spiritually fruitful if we remain united to Christ. Jesus said: “*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

Do you see ever increasing spiritual fruit in your life? More and more faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love (2 Pet 1:5-10)? Then praise the Lord for this evidence that you are fruitful because the life of the Risen Christ is at work in you, transforming and renewing you to become more and more like Him.

How do you respond to the Lord’s gracious discipline in your life, which you likely experience as suffering, trial and loss? “*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*” (Heb 12:11). Just like skilled pruning of the branches of a vine results in more fruit, so the Lord’s moulding and shaping of our character through challenging circumstances results in greater yields of spiritual fruit.

Do you see less spiritual fruit in your life than you desire? Perhaps less ‘*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and/or self-control*’? (Gal 5:22). Or do you see the ‘works of the flesh’ ‘*idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these*’ (Gal 5:19-21)? Then receive the Word of the Lord today, as a messenger sent to you by God Himself to call you to repent and turn to the Beloved Son of God. Believe that Jesus is who He has revealed Himself to be. The faithful Son who was killed by unfaithful people in order to take your place and to die for your sin. The Risen, living Son who is the cornerstone of His church, the Rock of your salvation and the One who alone enables you to live a spiritually fruitful life that is pleasing and honouring to the Lord to whom belongs everything that there is in this creation.

Brothers and sisters, our salvation is the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes!

AMEN.