

The parable of the tenants in the vineyard
Trinity 2-8-15
Isaiah 5: 1-7 (Song of the vineyard)
Luke 20: 9-18 (Parable of the tenants in the vineyard)

“O Lord, all the world belongs to you”, so begins one of the songs in the old Songs of God’s People hymnbook. And that is a very good starting point, not just for a sermon, if I may be as bold to say, but for a far more important reason – it is a good starting point and basis for living life itself – O Lord, all the world belongs to you! There is an old saying that “we come into this world with nothing and we go out with nothing”, and no one can argue with that, yet so many try to cling on to things in the interim during their life. Jesus himself reminds us that far more important than possessions and indeed anything else is the Kingdom of God – that is our primary concern and doing what God requires of us is our life’s greatest desire. We cannot serve both God and possessions. We have things – but at the end of the day they are only things – Jesus says, “Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in heaven...For your heart will always be where your riches are.”

Even when we give of our money to God and his Church, essentially we are giving back what is already his, for all the world and all that is in it belong to God; we are mere custodians of it for a while. And this includes land. How land has been fought over through every age and generation. We focus so much on trouble elsewhere in the world that we forget that it was not that long ago that we had our own conflict – what has been called in Northern Ireland simply as “The Troubles” – what a simple way of putting what became a complicated mess, and indeed where there are still tensions between different communities. When I was growing up I found it all so difficult to get my little brain around it – how could it ever be a conflict between Protestants and Catholics? Because to qualify to be one or the other you had to be a Christian, and Christians don’t go around killing and maiming and bombing each other, so was the logic of my naïve mind. It is far too simplistic to say it was just a conflict over land, where certain people wanted land to remain as part of the UK and some wanted land to be part of a united Ireland, but that was surely a large part of it. Because you live differently, have different traditions, can it every justify killing? No. No, it can’t. And yet sometimes

humanity must say no, as a last resort, when tyrants such as Hitler waltzed into neighbouring nations. Humanity must respect land but perhaps that happens when humans respect each other.

I seem to recall the Russian President Putin remarking something along the lines that in re-taking Crimea he was righting a historical wrong! Well whose land is it anyway? Who had it all originally? I say, "O Lord, all the world belongs to you." Maybe I should go and reclaim it for God to right a historical wrong! How many historical wrongs would we need to correct over the course of human history?

There have to be some boundaries and rules otherwise there would be chaos but perhaps the view that all the world belongs to God would help us to gain perspective. I mean – how do you solve the immigrant situation in Calais? People living in makeshift camps, people dying in the attempt to get to the UK, ports closed, lorries stacking up, villages overrun with traffic – the situation suits no one. Boats packed with refugees sailing dangerously over the Mediterranean waters, seeking a better life of sorts. The question vexing European leaders is "What do we do?" The answers seem unclear – but heading some money in that direction may not be the solution any more than the solution to the Israeli-Palestine situation is to build a solid wall eight metres high on ground that separates and divides. Now there is another "trouble" for which there is no simple solution. So do we throw our hands up in the air? We teach what we preach in the Christian faith and that is that all the world belongs to God – it is a good starting point – and through that we must learn to respect one another.

Once there were two families, so a story goes, who came to the Rabbi wanting him to settle a dispute about the boundaries of their land. He listened to members of one family as they recounted how they had received this land as their inheritance from their ancestors and now it had been in their family for generations. They had maps and papers to prove it. Then the Rabbi listened to the other family. Its members described how they had lived on the land for years, working it and harvesting it. They claimed that they knew the land intimately and that it was their land. They didn't have the papers to prove it, but they had the calluses and sore backs and the harvest and the produce of the land. The Rabbi looked at them both and backed away from between them. They turned on him and said, "Decide, Rabbi, who owns this land." But the Rabbi knelt down on the land and put his ear to the ground,

listening. Finally he stood up and looked at both families. He said: "I had to listen to both of you, but I had to listen to the land, the centre of this dispute also, and the land has spoken. It has told me this: "Neither of you owns the land you stand on. It is the land that owns you."

It is Australian Aboriginal thought that it is not that we own the land but that the land owns us – no human being is as old as the land – the land came first – and all the world belongs to God.

Isaiah says: "Listen while I sing you this song, a song of my friend and his vineyard. My friend says: Is there anything I failed to do for it? Then why did it produce sour grapes and not the good grapes I expected?" God has always put responsibility upon the shoulders of his people to care for everything and everyone. Jesus told the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. They acted shamefully. Three times a slave was sent and the tenants sent them back beaten, until the man who planted the vineyard sent his son and they killed him. Yet the dance goes on.

We are all pilgrims on earth, travelling along the journey of life. Are refugees a problem, or rather, are they a challenge to our thinking and our way of living?

We are grateful to God that he has put such a beautiful world in our care and for us all to enjoy. We are responsible to God for the land and for our neighbours, and for the way we treat the land and our neighbours. The son may have been killed but the stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. The vineyard is being reclaimed through the risen Lord.

A good way perhaps to start a sermon but also a good way to finish it: "O Lord, all the world belongs to you."

Amen.