

“Will he put those wretches to a miserable death?”
(4Oct2020)
Mt21:33-46; Is5:1-7; Phil3:4b-13

“Let us kill him and get his inheritance.”

My first impression on that line in this parable from Jesus was that it was gruesome.

In BYOB Bible Study this week, Paul Kent’s perspective as a lawyer indicated “that’s really bad legal advice.” Killing the heir is not how it works to get the inheritance. It made me laugh to beat the band. But it also got me thinking.

In parables it’s always worth pausing to see whether we should include God. As Jesus told these stories, landowners and slave owners and masters were the bad guys, terribly oppressive to most of Jesus’ poor friends and neighbors. So Jesus doesn’t often give a favorable view of those rich people, nor is that how he’d want us initially to picture God.

In this case, though, it seems more reasonable, what with Jesus building his story around the passage from Isaiah with God as the one with the vineyard.

The allegorical interpretation of this parable, where each component has a direct equivalent, is that God the owner first sends slaves, who are the prophets, whose message from God was frequently ignored and who themselves were not infrequently mistreated—put in the stocks, chucked into a mud pit, threatened, hunted down, etc.

If the people didn’t listen to the prophets, then, as God asks in Isaiah, “what more could I have done?” God sends the Son. We presume that when the vineyard owner sends the son, we should equate him with Jesus. In the story, Jesus seems to be predicting his own impending fate, that he’ll be arrested and killed.

Which brings us to the crucial turning point. Jesus asks, “if they kill the Son, what do you think God is going to do about it?” The chief priests and Pharisees eagerly answer, and maybe we’d reasonably offer it, too: “he will put those wretches to a miserable death.”

But we need to ask: is that actually the right answer? A powerful landowner may, in fact,

respond with such violent retribution, especially when so provoked by some sharecroppers thinking they could benefit from murder. But is that what God would or will do? Is that the outcome we expect from Jesus’ parable? Will God, indeed, put these wretches to a miserable death?

I guess we can wrap this up pretty quickly because we know that’s exactly what happened. The authorities killed Jesus and thought they could get away with it and that it would even do them good. So God was furious and had no choice but to send the heavenly host, that famed angelic army, to unleash the repercussions on the people with spiritual warfare of an immense nuclear blitz, and annihilated those wretches with a miserable death. Case closed. The end.

Except...No. Wrong. That’s not what happens after Jesus is killed. That’s not at all how God reacts. The chief priests and Pharisees have the outcome all confused, and so do we, if we’re expecting vengeful violence. Throwing them out is exactly not what God would do. They are proclaiming a false god.

How *does* God respond when the Son is executed? With resurrection, of course! Not with death and more death, but with new life.

And what does that mean for you? Not that you dread punishment, but exactly that even though we killed the heir, God still decides to bring us into the inheritance. Jesus bought the farm to give it to you. In our regular affairs, Paul Kent is exactly right: this is really bad legal advice. But evidently God isn’t interested in good legal advice; God is interested in showering blessing on you.

It’s so different than our normal conception that Jesus says it’s a scandal, a stumbling block. And yet it becomes the foundation of God’s shape of the cosmos.

When Jesus asks what will happen, he gets the wrong answer back. He doesn’t finish his story here with the correct answer. That waits until Easter Sunday, or until we enter his promise. But here’s one writer’s retelling of how the story would continue or conclude:

Imagine being one of the workers in the vineyard of this vast estate, who is sweating profusely while a well-dressed boy coolly walks by with his father on

his tour of the place. Imagine further being caught up in the rebellious fervor that spreads among the workers so that you go on strike and allow the grapes to grow wild. When the son, grown into a young man, comes to collect the produce, you join in the attack and kill the heir.

Then comes the reckoning. You and your fellow workers are brought to the magistrates, and you expect to suffer a grim fate for what you have done. To your shock, the owner of the vineyard shows up in court with the son you killed. The young man is very much alive, although the wounds inflicted on him are still bleeding. This really has you shaking in your boots.

But to your further shock, the father gets out his will and announces that the vineyard was bequeathed, not only to the son but to *all of the workers*. More shocking still, the father and his son welcome all of you back to work in the vineyard as joint owners. As fellow heirs, you are ready to act like heirs who will work to keep the grapes from growing wild so as to produce so much wine for the wedding feast that it will never run out.*

If you're wondering what this means for you and your place in this story, I'd say this meshes really well with the end of the 2nd reading. The anticipation, joining in what you know is coming and the promise of it all, is what Paul's talking about in Philippians. He hasn't obtained it yet. None of us has. The feast where the wine won't run out is still waiting, and at best we have a foretaste.

But we can be confident. We're confident not because we've been such hard workers, or because we have the genetics or the lawyers that would guarantee us the inheritance, not because we've earned our place or that our crackpot schemes will pay off or because we've restrained ourselves so well from most bad behavior to act as pretty good as proper servants.

We live with confidence only because we've got a God who's bad at legal advice but very good at generosity, and even better at celebrating, and just so, so, so much wants you to join in.

* Andrew Marr, *Moving and Resting in God's Desire*, p268-69, cited on <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper22a/>