

Forgetting what Lies Behind And Pressing on

This morning's readings are at first read a little heavy, a little like wading through treacle. Yet the word of God is always the word of life. This morning's parable, like those we have heard in recent weeks, is filled with the warning that all too often the religious miss the point and the outsiders will be included in the kingdom ahead of those whose inheritance it was.

This was a fairly heavy duty parable that took the early prophesies of Isaiah and the allegory of the vineyard, which was damming enough again the house of Israel, and added the killing of the servants and the son of the landowner. The religiously important, the object of the story, got the message and were not happy with Jesus! And in Matthew's retelling of it his community would not have missed the point either.

So what do we, nearly two thousand years later, take as our lesson from this? Firstly we need to hear this and every cautionary tale with an openness to being confronted with our own failings. Where in our life have we missed the point, thrown the messenger - even the son of God - out because we have not recognised him or found his message to our liking?

Secondly it is interesting to note that the parable ends with the thought that care of the vineyard will be given to a new people, not a new owner/leader. The kingdom of God will be found among this new lot of tenants – the rabble who make up the faith community around Jesus. The new tenants are the miscellaneous, the misled, the misfits. And they shall produce! And their cornerstone is the stone that was rejected.

It is hard for us so many eons later to grasp just how radical, paradoxical, and perverse a wisdom is at the heart of the gospel. The divine, God almighty has become flesh, not royal powerful flesh but trouble making, marginalised, vulnerable flesh and the kingdom of God will be realised in the midst of the ordinary, the oppressed and the outlandish. The profound has made his home among the profane. God is going to complete creation, to bring the law to fullness, and the tradition to fruition using as a cornerstone the one not recognised, the one mistreated and the one beaten to death.

And in this context we hear St Paul and his challenge to forget what lies behind and to strain forward to what lies ahead. This is not a sporting metaphor about being competitive

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and winning. It is about letting go of being on the winning team – St Paul had all the credentials but counted them loss.

This is a disconcerting message for those of us who have just been enjoying the 100th anniversary of the town as an independent shire and the part the church and church people have played in that. And when we look around our little church we have much in the past to be proud of and grateful for, and yet we too must let go of the glorious past, the readymade credentials, and be prepared to look forward, even forward to an uncertain and precarious future.

This seems to be a difficult truth at various times in our personal life too. When leaving a place of work or living and moving such as those of us who have moved down here, of facing illness and frailty, when re-evaluating a friendship or love, we must risk what we have already in order to grasp what might be. And it is true when asking ourselves what is God asking of us and for us, in this place at this time. It may be similar to the past in some ways. And it is sure to be different in some ways.

Whilst being grateful for what lies behind we must in some sense forget that and look to what is beckoning us – where our gifts, passions, abilities, personalities, and our experience is leading us individually and collectively.

This is challenging news and yet also hopeful news, for it means that the likes of you and I with all our gifts and faults, abilities and foolishnesses, our hopes and follies, might just be the tenants asked to take care of the vineyard, and with God's help might just be able to achieve what God wants.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.