

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Twenty – Mark 12:1-17

Mark 12:1 Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place.

A Walled Vineyard - We tend to think of vineyards as open fields, but in Biblical times, grapes were a high-cost luxury crop, and needed to be protected from both wild animals as well as people raiding the produce.



In the Song of Songs, where a vineyard is often used as an illustration of the blessings of life, we read, (2:15): ***Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.*** But wildlife wasn't the only danger; in Judges 6:3-6 – ***“Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops...”***

A wall was constructed, then, to keep out both 4 and 2 legged pests. A watchtower enabled sharp eyes to be kept for any who might breach the walls, or approaching bands who might seek to take the crop. It was also a refuge against attack for the supervisors and their families. Many such agricultural watchtowers have been found throughout Israel, as have pits for a winepress, carved out of stone.

The main reason Jesus gives this background information is not to assist us in imagining the scene, or to inform us regarding traditional Middle Eastern farming practice. He is using words carefully intended to evoke the prophecy of his favourite and most-oft quoted prophet, Isaiah, particularly Chapter 5:

Isaiah 5:1-2 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Jesus' choice of words is clearly intentional. 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah is using the vineyard as an illustration for the entire country of Israel. And the news isn't good: Isaiah pictures God lavishing care on the vineyard, his people, but meeting only with ingratitude and unfruitfulness:

Isaiah 5:2c-7 Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. 3 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. 6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."

7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

Not long after Isaiah's prophecies, Israel – the northern part of the land - fell to the invading Assyrian armies. Only the southern portion of the country, known as Judea, survived. Jesus, by invoking the Isaiah prophecy, is warning that the same is in danger of happening again.

Mark 12:2 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard.

In Jesus' story, the owner of the vineyard is God, the vineyard is Israel, and the tenants – the controllers of the watchtower (here clearly the Temple) are the “chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders,” the group to whom Jesus was speaking immediately prior to this story, and to whom he is speaking now. What fruits – blessings for all the people – have they produced? A servant-prophet will be dispatched to see.

Mark 12:3-5 But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. 5 He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

Jesus is now back to the Jeremiah passage he quoted, about the “den of robbers”. Later in that same chapter, which was a judgement against the corruption of the Temple, Jeremiah, on behalf of God, powerfully declares (Jeremiah 7:21-26):

21 “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! 22 For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, 23 but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.

24 But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. 25 From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. 26 But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.’

It is hard not to think of John the Baptist and the treatment he received from Herod, but so many prophets had been treated in this way that to be a prophet became equated with suffering, as Nehemiah lamented (9:26) ***“But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies.”***

Mark 12:6 “He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 7 “But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’

Those who doubt that Jesus viewed himself as the Son of God would have trouble explaining this parable. It also demonstrates that, if there was any question, the “chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders,” are the evil tenants, for they were already conspiring to kill Jesus – the son – and so maintain their position of power, which they regard as their inheritance.

But this brings another passage to mind - Genesis 37:20, and the plot of Joseph’s brothers: ***‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’*** Joseph, sent by his father to inspect the work of his brothers, was violently rejected yet went on to rule over the entire land of Egypt. So the rejection of the beloved Son of Jesus’ parable is the prelude to a radical turning of the tables: as in the case of Joseph, this story of a beloved son who becomes a victim ends also dramatically—with resurrection.

Mark 12:8 So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

Jesus knows what is coming. While he is under the protection of the crowd, perhaps still largely made up of the sympathisers he had gathered down by Jericho, he is under no illusions regarding the ultimate outcome of his time in Jerusalem. But what will be the result?

Mark 12:9 “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

Jesus had been repeatedly warning of the fate soon to befall the nation – a fate fully realised in 70 AD with the Roman invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem. The rule of the priests is coming to an end; the Temple is soon to fall. The vineyard – Judea - will become a Roman province, and the path to forgiveness will go through the work of Jesus.

Mark 12:10-11 Haven’t you read this passage of Scripture: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 11 the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

Even as we have been brought back to Isaiah and Jeremiah through this parable, we are now brought back to Psalm 118, which was being shouted out in the Hosannas of the Triumphal Entry. We have described these scenes as “street theatre,” with each action making a very specific point; now it begins to resemble a symphony, with themes being reintroduced and building to a crescendo.

Jesus, the rejected one, will ultimately replace the Temple and all of its functions. The builders (and the tenants) have failed; the Lord alone can and will set things right, even as the owner of the vineyard comes and establishes control. A new Temple is coming with Jesus as the keystone (which holds up the arch) or cornerstone (which holds up the building): it will be a Temple of Faith.

Mark 12:12 Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

None of this is lost on “the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders,” who are seeking to arrest Jesus, to silence him, and to have him charged with blasphemy and sedition. But Jesus was wise to assemble a sympathetic crowd; the arrest must be done stealthily. They are assembling their blasphemy case, but sedition, as the following story will prove, will be harder to establish:

Mark 12:13-14a Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 14 They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

Right away, we see this as a cunning plot. “The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders,” were now well known to Jesus, so another unknown group is enlisted to try to “catch him in his words;” perhaps Jesus will let his guard down with them. They establish the ruse with flattery, but Jesus is not fooled.

Mark 12:14b-15 Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

Some background: Judea became a Roman province in A.D. 6 after the failed tenure of Herod Archelaus as tetrarch – Roman procurators were put in his place. A census was then taken, from which the Romans levied a head tax, a tax distinct from the one on property and from customs on articles. Its establishment provoked Judas of Galilee to lead a revolt because it placed God’s own land at the service of foreigners (mentioned in Acts 5:37).

Now, Jesus, well-known as a Galilean, is being asked the tax question. “These opponents probably peg Jesus as an extremist who will flash the same militant zeal as Judas the Galilean. If he openly rejects the head tax, he will be like those diehard rebels who incited

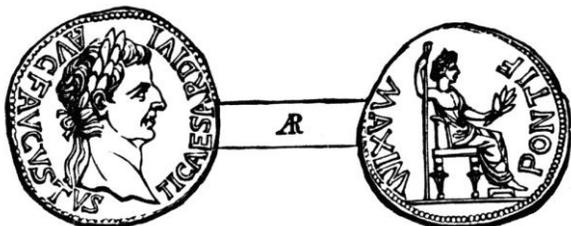
revolt and will be subject to arrest for treason. But if he endorses the tax, he will undermine his support among the zealous, who chafe under Roman rule.” (David Garland)

Mark 12:15 But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”

Jesus recognises both the hypocrisy (literally, “acting under disguise”) and the trap, and then sets an astonishing trap of his own. Rather than reach into the pocket of his robe (did robes have pockets?) or ask his disciples – Judas, maybe – for a coin, he asks them to produce one. In doing so, they are already admitting complicity with the occupying Romans!

Mark 12:16-17 They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. 17 Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.

“Jesus can now answer their question. Caesar’s coins belong to him. Since they have no qualms about doing business with Caesar’s money, they had better pay Caesar’s taxes. And since they are able to produce the coin, Jesus also exposes that they have no qualms about bringing an image of Caesar and an emblem of his worldly power and his pretension to deity into God’s temple.” (David Garland)



But Jesus says more. In asking whose image is on the coin, Jesus of course points to Caesar. So what then is God’s? To answer that think about this term “image.” It isn’t accidental. We are told, way back in Genesis, that humanity was created “in the image of God.” The coin bears Caesar’s image. Humanity bears the Image of God, and so belongs, in entirety, to God – all our heart, soul, mind and strength, as Jesus will shortly say just a few verses on (Mark 12:30).

Next Week: Mark 12:18-44