

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 21:33-44

***"The Cornerstone"***

Today's Holy Gospel brings us to the very last week of Jesus' earthly life. A lot of times people lose sight of that fact. He has just finished telling of the parable of the two sons – which we heard last week, and a parable of the workers in the vineyard. In between those two parables was Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey, that we call 'Palm Sunday.' Jesus gives us the "Parable of the Wicked Tenants" – which is not only recorded here in Matthew chapter 21, but also in Luke chapter 20 and Mark chapter 12. It is very important because Jesus is giving us insight into what is about to happen.

This parable is once again set in a vineyard and is based on Isaiah 5:1-7. Jesus reminded the Jews of God's goodness to them as a nation, as a people, having delivered them from Egypt and planted them in a rich land of milk and honey. God gave them material and spiritual blessings and He only asked that they bear fruit for His glory. From time to time, God sent His servants – the prophets, to the people to receive that fruit. But the people mistreated the servants, and even killed some of them. As He spoke this to the people – they had to have made some connection with the parable and the Scriptures, especially Isaiah – BUT – they had no way of knowing what would happen in the next few days. Jesus had told His disciples and Apostles many times that He must suffer and die. Here's just one example: *"And he said, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.'"* (Luke 9:22) They heard His words but probably didn't connect the dots until after His arrest and death.

Time after time God sent His Prophets to alert Israel of their need to repent and change their ways. Time after time they deliberately rejected His words and went ahead and did their own thing – even to the point of idolatry. It cost them the first Temple – and the destruction of Jerusalem, being cast into exile in Babylon for 70 years. Here was a people who had been given the Land and so many blessings, but like the tenants of the Vineyard – they had their own agenda and were disobedient not only to God's Law, but to His Word and demands for repentance.

Jesus is telling the people exactly what is going on right in front of them – that He is being rejected by those He came to save, but that He is destined to be vindicated by God the Father – who is of course the vineyard owner; the vineyard is Israel; the tenant farmers are Israel's officials, and the slaves are the earlier prophets, ending with John the Baptist. The Son is of course Jesus himself. This is a story full of depth, sorrow and power. It tells how Jesus has now come to Jerusalem to confront the tenant farmers with God's demand for the fruit of their repentance, for Israel to at last be what it was called to be, the light of God's world. And it is the story of how Israel, through its official representatives, is going to refuse that demand, and will end up by killing Him – in just a matter of days.

Listen to these words from today's Holy Gospel *"Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? 'Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.'"* (Matthew 21:42-44) I find it very interesting that the Hebrew word for "son" is "ben" – in 1Kings 4:8-18 the 12 district governors are listed starting with *"Ben-Hur in the hill country of Ephraim."* I realized when I was looking into this that the Hebrew word for stone is "eben." I really don't think that this is a coincidence. I had always thought that "bar" was "son of" in Hebrew - but that is Aramaic – which was the spoken language of Jesus' day. Jesus is speaking of the "ben" who is also the "eben."

There is very real Scriptural history in Jesus' speaking of the 'capstone' or as is said in some translations 'cornerstone.' I used to struggle with the word "cornerstone" because for me it was the image of a stone put in a building and usually has the date it was built, and some other words – and possibly contains a sort of time capsule containing items from when it was built – so that when the building finally comes down people can see. As I started researching further I found that it is a "capstone" that is truly what is being spoken of. When the building goes up – this stone is put on top of the corner to hold it all together. What a marvelous image of what Jesus is saying. He is the means of repentance and judgment. Rejecting God's beloved Son by failing to submit your life to Him has serious consequences.

Jesus was referring to Holy Scripture taken from the Prophet Daniel chapter 2: with the image from a dream by King Nebuchadnezzar about a huge statue. Daniel writes *"The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay."* (Daniel 2:32-33) Then suddenly he wrote: *"While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them."* (Daniel 2:34) All of this brought forth this conclusion: *"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever."* (Daniel 2:44) The people of Jesus' day thought the feet of iron mixed with clay was Rome – the last kingdom.

So, what about the stone – the 'eben'? Could it be that the last kingdom, the kingdom of iron mixed with clay, is not Rome after all. Maybe, from Jesus' point of view, it is the uneasy alliance of Herod and the chief priests – who he put there in the first place. Maybe it is their shaky kingdom that will come crashing down when the stone eventually falls on them. But before it can become the chief stone in the building it has to be rejected. And that, is going to happen to Jesus - in just a matter of days.

The Apostle Peter later referred to this in his first epistle *"For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'" Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,*

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*"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message-- which is also what they were destined for."* (1 Peter 2:6-8) You see, those who aren't broken before Him will one day be broken by Him. *"Every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord."* (Philippians 2:10) The only question that remains here is when will your life be broken by God's precious chosen corner stone? Will you give your life to Him – have you given your life to Him - now to be broken before Him in repentance and be saved? Or will you be like those who wait too long and will be broken or crushed by Him when He returns to judge the world?

You know, it is funny – sometimes people will say “can it be that simple?” “Can it really be that simple – that all you need to do to be save is believe in Jesus Christ?” I have said many times from this pulpit – and you have heard me – even last weekend – about John 3:16. You will hear it again in just a few moments with the ‘comfortable words.’ *“For God so love the world that He send His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”* If you believe in Him, and give yourself to Him, you will be broken – but strengthened and a new creation. If you don't believe in Him and stand against Him - when that stone falls – look out!