

"Believe or Reject?"

Today's Holy Gospel reading is a parable that is filled with symbolism that points directly to God the Father waiting patiently for His people to respond to His Law, even to the point of sending His Son. The vineyard owner sends messengers to the tenant farmers, who beat them and send them away. The symbols are that the owner stood for God, the farmers for Israel, and the messengers for the prophets. Finally He sent His own beloved Son. It is easy for many of us to identify the connections, because we know the life of Jesus, but the people of Israel, represented by the Temple leadership looked at this parable as accusations toward them, and not about God's unending love for them.

Let's try to look at this parable in Jesus' own understanding, He came as the rightful King, the rightful heir, to His Father's tenants; and they were blocking His way, determined to keep the vineyard for themselves. That was their ulterior motive. So, what did they do? They threw Him out and killed Him. The Way of the Cross – where Jesus carried that cross on that Friday = was uphill – to the city gates. He was taken outside the city gates – and was crucified, died and was buried. So they threw Him out and they killed Him. Are you getting the correlation here? So far, the meaning of the story is obvious. Jesus is the rightful heir to the work of the ancient prophets, and has come to fulfill their work, challenging Israel one more time to give to the God of the covenant, God the Father, the honor, reverence and obedience that should be due Him.

Israel was charged, meaning that they were given the job of bearing the fruit of justice in its own life, and showing God's grace to the world around it. But Israel insisted on keeping that grace all for itself, practicing injustice, and seeking to fend off and resist the world around it by whatever violence might be necessary. The zealots with their uprisings and so on. Israel had rejected the way of peace, and is now rejecting its final messenger - Jesus. The truth is that the vineyard owner will return at last, and, when He does, the judgment will fall on Israel. He will destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. He came first to the Jew and then to the Gentiles. The current regime in Jerusalem during Jesus' time, and the self-appointed guardians of Israel's laws and heritage, are signing their own death warrants – just by their actions and closed minds. Their rejection of Jesus will be taken up by God into the rebuilding plans for His people: *'the stone the builders rejected,'* in this case the Messiah sent to Israel but rejected, *'has become the capstone'.*

Are you familiar with what a 'capstone' is? It is also known as a cornerstone. When you are building a building, especially in the olden days when you are stacking the rocks, and you get to the point where you are finishing that wall – you want to hold it together – and so you need a stone that will go at the corner, the cornerstone or capstone.

There is a quotation from Psalm 118:22 using a quite different image from a vineyard. Imagine a builders' yard, full of stone ready for use. The workers are sorting out the lumps of marble

The Fifth Sunday of Lent- April 7, 2019, Year C

and granite into different sizes and shapes, so they can haul them up to their places on the wall that is surrounding the city. There is one stone that doesn't belong in any of the groups; they put it over by itself, expecting to throw it out when the job is done. But when they have almost finished, they discover that they need a stone of a particular shape for the very last piece, to round off the top of the corner. How many times have you heard that verse and not really understood what was going on? This is the stone they rejected earlier in the process. It wouldn't fit anywhere else, but it will fit here! Here this verse pushes the message home. The workers very well might reject Jesus now, but they will find that He will be the right one - He will be seen as the true Messiah. He will build the true Temple, and will Himself be the True High Priest, the standard by which everything and everyone else is to be judged.

If this was what happened when Jesus came to Jerusalem, can you just imagine what happens when Jesus' followers go today to the places of power and injustice in the world? What sort of reaction will the Holy Gospel receive when it is proclaimed in places where people use religion – including Christianity – as a means of reinforcing their own security - instead of shining God's light and truth into the world? We can clearly see today that it can mean rejection and violence. Look at the persecution that is taking place today. The problem is you don't hear about it on the TV news or your local radio. It is sad, but true, - it is going on – but there is other news that they are more concerned with. There is persecution taking place in over 60 countries around the world persecuting people for one reason - simply because they are on Christian – believers in Jesus Christ. Over 245 million Christians experience persecution in some sort or another, many being imprisoned for owning a Bible or trying to tell others about Jesus. Countries like North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, Iraq and more that are communist or practice extremist anti-Christian religions. The list is so short that I have given – but it is so long in reality. Here in the United States we are blessed to be able to practice our faith – but you know what? We are not free from ridicule by any means. Watch the sitcoms or the evening news! Christians are made fun of or made to look like we are practicing some way out and un-hip religion that doesn't change with the times. The truth never changes – it is truth - or it is not! You either believe the truth that Jesus says and is – or you reject it – and you reject Him!

As this parable says - the vineyard owner will return and have the last word. What happened to Jesus was not just an example of what always happens under these circumstances. It was the decisive victory. Ever since then, His followers have gone on their mission, not in order to try one more time to persuade the rich, the powerful and even the religious to accept God's ways of peace and love, but in order to declare, by their life and their words, that this way has already triumphed in Jesus, that the renewed vineyard is bearing fruit, that the new Temple is being built, with its "capstone" or "cornerstone" already in place. The One that the builders rejected? His Name is Jesus!

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the Sunday that we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into the City of Jerusalem – during which many lined the streets, laying down their coats and waving palm branches as He entered on the back of the foal of a donkey. John's Gospel says this:

The Fifth Sunday of Lent- April 7, 2019, Year C

"They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! " "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" (John 12:13) Just five days later many of these same people who shouted, 'Hosanna and Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord' would reject their King by crying out: "'Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." (John 19:6) How quickly the tide can turn. One day exalted and raised up as the King, and the next – rejected and crucified.

The Apostle Peter writes this, *"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" (1 Peter 2:6).* In today's world we are surrounded by all kinds of advice, all kinds of experts, especially during Holy Week on some of the 'history' channels. You will see people like John Dominic Crossan and Elaine Pagels. They say they are experts but they don't speak the truth. There are some "experts" who make statements to cast doubt on the divinity of Jesus, and even His resurrection. Somebody has something to say about everything! Sometimes it runs in circles – no judgement – and a lot of things spoken just to sow the seeds of doubt. Let's face it - the only true and trustworthy expert is Jesus Christ. He gives us the absolute certain truth and it is recorded for us to read and meditate on in Holy Scripture. If we repent and fall upon Jesus Christ as the new cornerstone of our life, our life will be broken in pieces, but by trusting in Him and living for Him we can rebuild it upon the chosen cornerstone of eternal existence. If we fall upon Him and build our life upon Him, we will never, ever be put to shame. My brothers and sisters in Christ, my dear friends - it's never too early to begin to build your life based and built upon the cornerstone, the solid foundation – Jesus Christ.

I want you to hear the words of the Lord God spoken through the Prophet Isaiah: *"So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed" (Isaiah 28:16)* That was 600 years before Jesus Christ lived – before He walked the earth. Those are the very same words that Peter spoke of in 1 Peter. When I think about a sure or solid foundation – I am always led to Jesus' message about the two builders in which He said *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."* (Matthew 7:24-27) I often uses those verses at baptisms because it is true. The person being baptized makes a choice – how do they want to live their life? If it is an infant the godparents and the parents make the choice at that point in time that they want that child to be raised on the solid rock foundation, the cornerstone named Jesus Christ. The foundation of Jesus' Words – and the more we know and love the Him, the more stable and reliable our faith becomes and even in hard times it will hold firm. He is our rock, our foundation, our cornerstone.