

“A Precious Cornerstone”

In today's Holy Gospel Jesus tells the people the parable of the vineyard owner who has sent messengers to the tenant farmers, to no effect. It goes without saying that no first-century Jew would have needed to be told that the owner was a representation for God, the farmers for Israel, and the messengers for God's prophets. The landowner, having no one left to send, sent his own beloved son. This son came as the rightful heir, the King to his Father's tenants; and they were standing in his way, determined to keep the vineyard for themselves. Eventually they threw him out and killed him.

So far, the meaning of the story seems pretty obvious – and fits like a glove with the rest of Luke's Gospel so far. Jesus is of course the rightful heir, and has come to complete the work of God's ancient prophets, challenging Israel one more time to give to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the honor and obedience that is His due to Him. Israel was supposed to be producing the fruit of righteousness, and then showing God's grace to the world around them – if not the entire world. But Israel in its own self-centered way was insisting on keeping the grace all for itself, practicing injustice in its own life, and seeking to repel and resist the world around them by whatever violent means might be necessary. Israel rejected the way of peace, and is about to reject its final messenger. But the story doesn't stop there. The vineyard owner will return at last, and, when He does, the judgment that Israel longed to see meted out on the pagan nations will instead be sentenced upon her. He will destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others – the Gentiles.

The leadership in Jerusalem during Jesus' day, and the Temple's self-appointed guardians of Israel's laws and heritage, are signing their own death warrants! 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.”* These words from Psalm 118:22 use a very different image from that of the vineyard. Ironically and this is an “aha moment” that the very same psalm is echoed by the crowds in Luke 19:38 as Jesus rode on the back of the colt into the city when they said *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* There is no irony here – God knows what He is doing – before we do. Jesus' reference to the capstone or cornerstone reminds the people of the construction of the temple under Solomon's reign when the massive stones were chiseled miles away from the building site in order that no sound would be heard upon the temple mount. When the stones arrived, if one stone didn't fit and was thrown down the hill into the Kidron Valley. When it became evident that the cornerstone was missing, the stone that had been rejected turned out to be the one that fit perfectly. Jesus applies this to Himself. “You're trying to build your salvation apart from Me, but you're going to see that I am the Cornerstone. Without Me, nothing stands.” This is in effect what Jesus is saying. Jesus is the stone which does not fit the preconceived notion of the Messiah. He is not coming in riding on a white horse with a sword up in the air. No, He is peaceful; He comes in meek and mild, preaching peace. His resurrection from the dead though proves that He is the one on whom all eternity is built. Though the leaders of the political world

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and the religious world may reject Jesus, God has made Him the centerpiece of His plan. Though people, even all people, reject Him and refuse to build their life upon Him and His Word, there is no replacement of or for God's precious and chosen Corner Stone. Jesus' quoting this verse at this point absolutely rams His message home. The workers may reject Jesus now, but they will find very very soon that He will be vindicated. Soon He will be seen as the true Messiah. He will build the true Temple, and He Himself will be its chief feature, the standard by which everything and everyone else is to be judged. It very well may well mean rejection and violence and the history of Christian martyrdom and persecution is a glaring witness to that.

But the vineyard owner will have the last word. The blood of the martyrs is always the seed of the church. What happened to Jesus was the decisive victory. Ever since then, His followers have gone on their mission, to declare, by their life, their words, and their actions that this way has already triumphed in Jesus, that the renewed vineyard is bearing fruit, that the new Temple is being built, with its corner-stone already in place – Christ Himself.

Verse 15 and 16 of today's Gospel reveal the ultimate result of the callous and hardness of the man's heart against the rule of God. *"So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When the people heard this, they said, "May this never be!"* The rejection of the message and the messengers is harsher each time. Ultimately, instead of remorse and repenting, they do the very opposite. The rebellious tenants killed the beloved Son, a glimpse and foreshadowing of the fate that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. The son is killed outside the vineyard or camp evidenced by the author of Hebrews: (Hebrews 13:12-13) historically we know that Golgotha was outside the city gates. *"And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore."* That is what Lent is all about!

The vineyard was a familiar image of God's investment and expectation of return from His people. God had used this image numerous times through the words of the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. These people understood the implication and were stunned at the word of final punishment on the tenants, sensing that they too will fall with the nation as God turns over the vineyard over to Gentiles. The Holy Gospel says that they wanted to kill Jesus right then, but they were afraid of the reaction of the people.

Jesus' words of prophecy were another opportunity, another invitation for the Jewish leaders to repent, to turn back to God. He was pleading with them to turn to God in truth and save not only their own lives, but the life of their whole nation. So what was their answer? They responded with a tragically unrepentant, *"May this never be!"* (Luke 20:16) The crowd's strong negative response indicates that they understood the consequences of what Jesus was saying: the Jewish system was being set aside because the religious leaders were rejecting Him and the people were following their leadership instead of God's. This parable climaxes and sums up all of Jesus' messages concerning the fact that Gentiles and outcasts, tax collectors and sinners –

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repentant - would be added to the kingdom because Israel would not recognize and submit to Jesus and His authority.

Verse 18 states that those who will not fall upon this stone in the brokenness of repentance will have that stone fall upon them in judgment. *“Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”* I struggled for a long time with the words “corner stone” because for me I had 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 to look further “capstone” is truly what is being spoken of. When the building goes up – this stone is put atop the corner to hold it all together. It is a tremendous image of what Jesus is saying. He is the means of repentance and judgment. Rejecting God’s beloved Son by failing to cast your life upon Him has grave consequences. 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 is when will your life be broken by God’s precious chosen corner stone? Will you cast your life upon Him now to be broken before Him in repentance and be saved? Or will you wait too long and be broken or crushed by Him when He returns to judge the world?

The Apostle Peter writes, *“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 this political campaign. Somebody has something to say about everything! Sometimes it runs in circles – no judgement – it is just what I am hearing. We just need to turn on the TV or radio and there is a subject matter expert giving advice on just about everything. The only true and trustworthy expert is Christ. He gives us the absolute certain truth which is recorded for us written in Holy Scripture. If we repent and fall upon 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 - it’s never too early to begin to build a life based and built upon the cornerstone, the solid foundation – Jesus Christ.

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus told His disciples that there were two men – one man built his house upon the sand, and the wind blew and the storms came. What happened to that house? It was washed away! The other man build his house on the solid rock – and when the winds came, and the storms came – it stood! That is the foundation on which we build our faith – Jesus Christ the righteous! Let Satan gives us his best shot – but Christ stands with us, and we will stand with Him for all eternity. Is that good news? Amen!