

Luke 20:9-19

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] Amen. Well, Advent is quickly approaching, isn't it? The season of peace and goodwill to men, of stars and of gifts and of festive cheer, of the baby in the manger, gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

And as we approach Advent, as we think about the coming of the Lord Jesus as a baby, this passage that we've just read jolts us out of that a bit, doesn't it?

Because Jesus teaches here that his arrival marks not just Christmas cheer, but a crisis. He comes as the light of the world, but it turns out that there is a dark side to Christmas.

When the light comes, he reveals a dark side in us. And Jesus tells a parable in Luke 20, and he pictures the arrival of the son of a vineyard owner, who comes to deal with a bunch of rebellious tenants on his land, doesn't he?

And when they recognise this son, they throw him out and they kill him. So the owner rightly punishes them for that. He destroys them, and we think, good for him, that's the right thing to do.

[1 : 24] Jesus tells this parable, and he directs this story towards the chief priests and the scribes, the religious leaders of the day. Who have consistently sought to reject Jesus as Lord.

They are supposedly building God's kingdom as the kind of religious ministers of the day. But the building is going to fall on top of them as they reject Jesus.

Jesus uses the language, doesn't he, of stones crushing people. I was watching one of these DIY shows a while back, and they were trying to create extra space on the ground floor.

You know, they wanted to kind of knock a wall through and create a kitchen diner. But there was one problem, because there was this pillar in the way. And the owner of the house wanted to get rid of the pillar, so he could have this open plan dining area.

But the experts were saying, no, no, you can't touch this pillar. It is a load-bearing pillar. You can't move this pillar. It's the cornerstone of the building.

[2 : 31] You can't take it away. But when they left for the night and the kind of cameras had gone away, the amateur DIY enthusiast just took a sledgehammer and worked away at this pillar overnight.

And he removed it. The next morning, the crew arrived to see the disaster that had ensued overnight, because the whole house had collapsed in on the ground floor.

The upper floors had just fallen in. And anything that was on the ground floor had been crushed. Anything and everything was smashed into pieces. Fortunately, he'd managed to get out of the house in time.

And Jesus says, doesn't he, in this parable, that he is like that pillar at Christmas time. In verse 18, he quotes from Psalm 118.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, the load-bearing pillar. And everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces.

[3 : 36] And when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. He says to the religious leaders, you're trying to get rid of me, but your whole ministry is built on the cornerstone of my person.

The whole building of God's people is about me. So he's talking about stones crushing people's heads. He's talking about vineyard owners destroying tenants.

It doesn't feel like the typical Advent message, does it? All this crushing and all this destroying of people. It's a little bit less Jesus meek and mild, and a little bit more harsh Jesus, mean and wild, isn't it?

As we hear Jesus rebuking these leaders, we have to put ourselves in the picture as well. He directs these warnings against them, but Luke tells us, doesn't he, in verse 9, that he tells the parable to all the people that are there.

And notice the words in verse 18. Everyone and anyone who falls on this stone, who tries to pull it out of the building, will be crushed by it.

[4 : 50] Everyone and anyone who tries to take a sledgehammer to Jesus, and remove him from their lives, should expect him to crush them.

And we hear this, don't we, and we think, how can Jesus say these things? What justifies this sort of harsh language of crushing, and of destroying?

How dare Jesus say this to me? That unless I accept him as Lord of my life, as the prime pillar of my life, and as the world, the house will come down on me.

How dare he say that to me? Well, the parable is told, I think, and it's designed very cleverly, isn't it, to help us to see why Jesus has got every right to say that to these people here, and to me.

Jesus is justified in saying that to me, in the same way that the vineyard owner is justified in destroying the tenants in the parable. The parable draws us in, doesn't it, to agree with the vineyard owner, and say, it is jolly well right that he destroys them for that.

[6 : 05] It is right that he punishes the tenants for mistreating the son that he sends to them. The parable, it draws me out to confess that I've got to agree with God that it is right that Jesus should crush people who reject him, even if that's me.

Look closely at verse 14, because I think in verse 14 we see why the judgments in the passage are justified. Look at how they're behaving, these tenants.

Look at what they say, and what they think, and how they behave. Verse 14, they say to themselves, this is the heir, let us kill him, so the inheritance may be ours.

That behaviour, and that kind of motivation in them is what justifies the terrible judgement that Jesus pronounces on them, isn't it? And I think we can see three things here.

Three things is their behaviour, what they say, what they think, and what they do, and it reflects a crazy, arrogant, vile response to Jesus, which in the end, we have to admit, deserves justice.

[7 : 23] First of all, the tenants deserve their fate, because number one, they know who Jesus is. There is a recognition, they know who Jesus is.

How is it that the tenants deserve to be destroyed? It is because for people who've met Jesus, particularly the religious leaders of the day, in their heart of hearts, they know who he really is. They've met him, and they reject him, and they're culpable for the knowledge they have of him. The more you know of him, the more serious it is not to treat him as he should be treated.

So look at the parable. As the son comes to the vineyard, they immediately recognise who he is, don't they? Verse 14. Ah, this is the heir.

They know that there is something different about Jesus. Jesus is not just another religious guy, is he? He's not a religious nutcase. When you look at him properly in the gospel accounts, it's not that he's another prophet, or another servant of God, of the vineyard.

[8 : 41] No, he is infinitely more than that. In the parable, did you see, there's a sudden upgrade of status, status with the people that the vineyard owner sends.

The authority is ramped up, isn't it? As it goes from servants that are sent by the vineyard owner, three times, to suddenly the owner's son.

They've kicked out those with lesser authority, but surely they'll receive the one with equal authority. The heir, the son, surely they'll respect him, the owner thinks.

The owner says, I'll send my beloved son to them. The word beloved is used in Luke's gospel, Jesus' baptism, isn't it? Where God calls out, this is my beloved son.

With you I am well pleased, he says. If Jeremiah, the prophet, had been around, he would have said the same thing about the religious leaders of Jesus' day, as he said in his day.

[9 : 52] Jeremiah chapter 7, from the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I persistently sent all my servants to you, my prophets to you, day after day, and yet you have not listened to them, or inclined your ear to them.

You've been stiff-necked towards them. But now it is worse than that, isn't it? Because Jesus is not a mere prophet.

He is not just a servant. When we get to the New Testament, we see that God has a son who carries equal authority and equal status with God.

The letter to the Hebrews begins, long ago, at many times, and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he created the whole world, the son is the one who is sent with

equal authority and equal status to the vineyard owner himself, to God himself, who Paul says, all the fullness of deity dwells in him bodily, in Jesus Christ.

And so there is a shift of authority, isn't there, in the sending of prophets and of servants. And suddenly there is a sending of a son and so with the shift in authority and status comes a shift in consequences, in rejecting him.

[11 : 35] You know, if you bully my son's friends at school, yeah, that will make me unhappy, that is one thing, isn't it? But if you bully my son, that is something else.

If you reject my son, that is something else. And the religious leaders and the chief priests reject him, not because they doubt his credentials as this man, but in their heart of hearts they know who he is.

His teaching and his miracles, his words and his works, his logic in dissecting their hypocrisy. Yes, this is the heir.

This is the son of God. And so he falls heaviest on those who reject him and know him most for who he really is.

And in their heart of hearts they know who he is, don't they? And so his judgment is warranted on them. They know who he is. That's the first thing. The second thing is that they want to kill him.

[12 : 43] It's the recognition and it's the response towards him, isn't it? They want to kill him. Look at verse 14 again. This is the heir.

Let us kill him, they say to themselves. It is the violence of the response to Jesus. It's interesting in the passage.

Did you notice as the parable kind of builds up, there is an increase in authority of the servants that the owner sends to the vineyard, isn't there? And suddenly the status and authority ramps up when the son is sent.

But the response is also ramped up as the authority increases. The violence and the hatred towards those who are sent ramps up.

And the severity of the response ramps up, doesn't it? Suddenly, when the heir, the son, is sent, the violence ramps up too.

[13 : 48] You see, with the previous servants, they are beaten and they are humiliated, which is awful. But with the son, it is murder. True hostility towards the vineyard owner is exposed when he is present.

When the son appears. In a much clearer way than it was before. The violence from the tenants and the killing and the peak expression of human rebellion against God is reserved for the son.

He is the one who uniquely attracts hidden rebellion against God. He is the one who arouses the rebellion of the human heart like nobody else can and does.

That is what happens in the nativity narratives, isn't it? Just think of Matthew's gospel. What is the overwhelming atmosphere in Bethlehem just after Jesus is born? It is violence.

As Herod's soldiers ransack every home with a two year old boy or younger. Herod goes on the war path. Jesus comes into the world and the rebellion of human hearts rears its ugly head, doesn't it?

[15 : 12] And Herod baits for Jesus' blood right from the moment he enters into the world. As the true light comes into the world, not just those who have spoken about the light before his coming, but as the light himself comes, then the darkness tries to resist him most of all.

And so when Jesus is killed at his crucifixion, when the vineyard owners do crucify him, he doesn't just die as a co-victim with other human beings.

There is a sense that he does that, but it is much more than that. It's not that he just faces the general wickedness of the world that we all experience and share.

He doesn't just fall victim to the same frustrations exactly, and the same evils that we all suffer universally in this world. No, he dies as the victim of all evil and rebellion in the world.

God. He dies as the lightning rod of all of humanity's hatred towards God. He dies and he suffers like no one else suffers and dies.

[16 : 32] He is murdered and he is murdered as the most hated man ever. He is more hated than anyone has been. Because he is the son.

he is the heir. He is the one, isn't he, who threatens our pride most. He is the one who threatens our sense of entitlement most.

He is the one who threatens our delusions of grandeur most. so he is justified in his judgment because they know who he is and they want to kill him.

And thirdly, they want what belongs to him, don't they? There is violence and there is a vanity about the vineyard tenants.

And those two things are connected. There is violence because there is this vain ambition of what they might get by killing him. In verse 14, let's kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.

[17 : 41] And it is ridiculous really, isn't it, what they are trying to do. What drives the religious leaders of the day to murder Jesus is this fantasy that they have that if they can get rid of Jesus, if they can get rid of the heir and the son of God and the king of the kingdom, they can carry on being the most important people in their lives and in the kingdom that they have set up around themselves.

They can be the most important people in the vineyard. And life can go on as before. They can be the ones with the crowns on their head that he should have on his head.

And that thirst for power makes them utterly stupid, doesn't it? As if they could do that. In their culture, often vineyards and plots of land would have been letted out to tenants just like in the parable and the owner may have been at a bit of a distance and actually Jesus says that, doesn't he?

The owner went to be in another country for a long time in verse nine. And so there is this feeling isn't there of distance from accountability, distance from culpability for what they are doing to the servants and to the son.

they maybe have this fantasy, don't they, that the vineyard owner won't find out, the vineyard owner can't see and he doesn't care what we're doing and he'll forget about the vineyard and he'll just leave it to us if we can get rid of Jesus.

[19 : 20] But of course that's totally ridiculous, isn't it? And as we listen to the parable, we know that just cannot happen because they've killed the son.

And of course the vineyard owner is going to do something about that, isn't he? But isn't that the arrogant myth that we tend to believe that is a kind of truth?

That we can keep our agenda and still get rid of Jesus, that we can pull out the cornerstone and we can still rule in God's house.

And that somehow he'll forget about that. That he'll just let us inherit the earth anyway. And that he's not bothered about his son. That if we kill him off, life will go on as before.

But that is ridiculous, isn't it? Because in our heart of hearts, when we spend any time with the Lord Jesus, we know who he is. And we know how he threatens our pride because his authority is the same authority as God himself.

[20 : 31] That he comes into the world as God, claiming what is his. As the owner of the vineyard. He is the beloved son, as John says in that famous verse.

He is God's one and only son. The one in whom he is well pleased. And so it is ridiculous, isn't it? That we think that we can pull him out and that we can kill him off and just carry on as before.

It's interesting, in the Hebrew language, the word stone and the word son is very, very similar actually. The word stone is the word eben.

It's an awful pronunciation, but eben. And the word son is ben. Very similar, aren't they? Stone and son. Apparently in the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, that the Romans surrounded the city, didn't they?

History tells us. And they sieged Jerusalem and they would hurl these great big stones over the wall to kind of get the people to just surrender. And as they hurled these stones over, they would shout, the sun is coming.

[21 : 42] Strange. I think they saw the link between stone and sun. I don't know why they did it, but maybe that's why. They would shout that out, ho, hyorios, er-h-tai, the sun is coming.

Get your heads down. And that is the jolt of this parable, isn't it, for us in Advent. It's another side of Advent, that as Jesus comes, it is as if God is hurling a stone over the wall into the world.

And that as the light of the world comes, it reveals a dark side in us. that the sun is flung over the walls into our lives and everyone and anyone who rejects him will be crushed by him.

Let me close just by looking at that second passage in Acts. Let's just look there. In Acts, it's kind of the sequel to Luke's gospel, isn't it? So Luke writes Acts.

And in Acts 4, there's a really similar scene. as Peter, Jesus' apostle, continues Jesus' ministry in a way, doesn't he?

[22 : 56] And he's there facing off against the same religious leaders that Jesus rebuked in Acts 4. There's been a lame beggar that's just been healed and they're questioning them about how they've done that and under whose authority they've done that.

And if you look at verse 10, he says, let it be known to you that it's by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you now.

And right after that, doesn't he, he quotes the same verse from Psalm 118 that Jesus quotes back in Luke 20. Do you see? Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.

His point in Acts 4 is that after the resurrection of Jesus, it has now become abundantly obvious and clear that those who have rejected and did reject Jesus have made a massive mistake.

The rejected stone has been proven to be the cornerstone on which all of God's kingdom is built.

And so it's an indictment upon them, isn't it, that they've recognised him and responded in violence and in vain arrogance, and they have killed the cornerstone.

[24 : 29] And they realise that now. But the amazing thing about Peter's sermon here is that instead of preaching judgment, and talking about crushing and destroying, he offers another lifeline, doesn't he?

Because he says in verse 12, salvation, not judgment, salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

salvation. And this is the wonderful irony, isn't it, of God's grace. Actually, Christmas and Advent shout to us the wonder of God's grace.

And Peter shouts here of God's grace to men and women who have killed the cornerstone, who deserve for him to fall on their heads. Christ, the one they have killed is the one who now offers them life.

The one they have oppressed is the one who now offers them freedom. Freedom from the guilt of what they've done. He gives life to the dead, the very people who have killed him.

[25 : 52] That is grace, isn't it? that the one that you can go to for life is the very one that we have killed. And the one that we can go to for in our darkness is the light that we've resisted.

And that is the wonder of Advent. That is the wonder of God's grace. Let's pray. Amen.