

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
October 4, 2020

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The ancient Hebrew people were never interested in abstract ideas. They left that to the Greeks. And so all through the Scriptures the people of God are described as a *vineyard* planted and tended by God. A vineyard or orchard has *boundaries*. Beyond the vineyard of Divine law and its observance are people who are *not* God's chosen. Motives, feelings, and large doses of sincerity, do not change the fact of having crossed out of bounds. So it is important this border be well-defined. That is what the Old Testament prophets did. Those who approach the vineyard from *either* side could compare the orderliness of a tended property on one side, and the randomness of thicket, bramble, brier, and rocks, on the other. *Vineyard* is a code word for God's people.

In order to fully understand Our Lord's Parable of the Wicked Tenants we also need to remember in ancient times God's people and God's Church were *one and the same*. Notions of secular and sacred were unknown. There was no such thing as "separation of church and state." We can certainly see friction and confrontation between God's prophets and the various kings of Judah and Israel! At issue however, was fidelity to (or corruption of) God's law as it affected every aspect of the people's life. The prophets regaled the various kings, not only about what we call "religious and liturgical matters", but brought Divine moral and ethical demands to bear on the practice of law, medicine, education, diplomacy, agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and every other commercial, social, and professional endeavor of God's people.

Already in the Old Testament we can detect a material worldview gradually marginalizing the prophetic voice. The parable Our Lord Jesus told described the consequences of this view. Almighty God, like the owner of the vineyard, is out of sight. From that fact it was easy to conclude if God is out of sight He is also *out of existence*. And if God does not exist, human beings do not have any rival for mastery of the universe. Against this increasingly prevailing mind-set, Our Lord constantly spoke of a *superseding spiritual reality* which shelters and supports the lesser world of matter and stuff. The Lord's parable shows what happens when the little world of materialism fails to take into consideration the larger reality. Secularism, in any political or philosophical form, believes itself to be autonomous

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and dominant when in fact it is only a part of the larger created foundation upon which it is dependent for its very existence. Supernatural means “higher natural.”

So Our Lord described a world in which the higher authority of God had become remote or theoretical. The secular world saw the Church as a mere set of “vested interests” attached to the past, resistant of progressive change, with no legitimate claim on any sphere of life beyond the private aspirations of her own adherents. “Keep your religion to yourselves”. It all sounds very modern! But Our Lord Jesus condemned this mindset in His Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

His parable shows the final insanity of this drift. He describes a society which refuses to comply with the demands of God and attempts to kill Him through His Son. Killing God is seen as *progress*! And all of a sudden we recognize what Jesus was doing. On Good Friday Caiaphas counseled it was expedient for one man to die rather than for the entire nation to suffer. He was simply reworking a very primitive and pagan impulse: you gain another’s power by killing him. That was something any cave man or cannibal would understand! The only difference was that Caiaphas re-packed his atavism in the guise of “sound political reasoning.”

Our Lord told this parable because His disciples had been nurtured to a point the whole drama of human history could be laid before them, even though in a veiled form. In the Garden of Eden man and woman were exiled because of their disobedience. In Christ’s parable it is *God’s exile* that is attempted by His creature. God’s Own Son is killed, but not before it is established He is “The Beloved Son” whose credentials are therefore from the Father. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants was told to help Christ’s followers see the total picture: the titanic struggle between good and evil that would come to a head in the Passion of Christ.

Those followers also needed to know the final word would be *Resurrection*. This is given in the form of a verse of Psalm 118, which tells of a stone rejected by the builders and yet in the end is set in the place of honor. As the headstone of the corner, Christ will reign over the world in glory. And those who oppose Him shall be scattered, like the inevitable dust of a poorly-built and crumbling wall.