

## Proper 22 (A)

Mt 21.33-46

There's one little verse in today's gospel lesson that should command our immediate attention, and it is this: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of righteousness." There's a rather clear warning there, and any time Jesus issues a warning those who want to call themselves his disciples should sit up and take notice.

But before we think about what Jesus might be saying to us, we need to attend to what he was saying to those who first heard him speak these words. It's no good trying to yank some portion of the scriptures out of its context in order to try and apply it to our lives; before we ask how the scriptures might be relevant in today's world, we need to ask how they were relevant during the time they were written. What did they mean in their original context?

We answer that question by attending to the details of the story. Who is Jesus talking to, and why does he speak these words? And what does he mean by the "fruits of righteousness," anyway?

The answer to the first question is rather straightforward: Jesus is talking to the chief priests and the elders of the people, and we know this because Matthew tells us. Today's gospel is part of a larger conversation Jesus is having with the religious authorities of his day.

Last week, we heard the beginning of this conversation. Think back to last week's gospel lesson: the chief priests and elders come to Jesus and ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" Today's gospel is part of the response Jesus gives to their question, and this gives us a clue to the meaning of the parable Jesus tells them about the landowner and his treacherous tenants.

In other words, the underlying issue at stake in the conversation between Jesus and the religious authorities has to do with the identity of Jesus himself: is he or is he not God's anointed messiah? Does he or does he not have the authority to do the things he's doing and to say the things he's saying? The parable he tells is intended to make the point that he is the heir sent to collect the harvest that is due to the landowner; he is the chief cornerstone, the foundation of the work God is doing in Israel. He is indeed God's anointed one, and the religious authorities should take heed. But they don't; they get angry.

So now we know who Jesus is talking to and why he says what he does. Does knowing this give us any insight into what he means when he talks about the fruit of righteousness? Indeed it does, but once again we need to attend to the wider context of Matthew's gospel.

Think back again for a moment to last week's gospel: the chief priests and the elders asked Jesus a question about his authority, and he responded by asking *them* a question. Do you remember what he asked them? "The ministry of John the Baptist: did it come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And the authorities squirm a bit and hem and haw and eventually decide to cut their losses and say, "We don't know." And Jesus responds to them by saying, "John came to

you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed and because they believed they're going into the kingdom ahead of you."

What this suggests is that when Jesus talks about the "fruit of righteousness" what he has in mind has something to do with the ministry of John the Baptist. And the two principal themes associated with the ministry and the message of John the Baptist are the need for repentance and the coming of the messiah, God's anointed one. "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come." Not, "is coming," but rather "has come." It's here. God's messiah has arrived, and he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and judgment will begin with the house of God.

So when we take the wider context of Matthew's gospel into account, the warning Jesus speaks about bearing the fruit of righteousness has everything to do with two things: repentance, and the coming of God's anointed one. The chief priests and the elders refused to see it, and so Jesus told this parable against them.

Okay, that's the easy part; now we're ready for the hard part. What might Jesus be saying to us? What relevance might this story have for us today? How we answer that question is tied up with how we understand what it means to bear the fruit of righteousness and what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

N.T. Wright is an English Anglican bishop and a biblical scholar who has done quite a bit of thinking about the kingdom of God. Wright once suggested that Christian thinking about the kingdom often goes wrong in one of two ways. On the one hand, he says, some Christians think about the kingdom of God in terms that are too Platonic or Gnostic; what this means is that some Christians think about the kingdom as an *escape* from the world. The kingdom is that immaterial, timeless place we go to be with God after we die and leave behind our earthly existence; you know, angels in white robes, fluffy clouds, harps, that sort of thing. But, says Wright, that's not what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom, and when we think about the kingdom the wrong way we end up thinking about Jesus the wrong way.

On the other hand, Wright says, some people think of the kingdom in terms of the *development* of the world. We've got evolution and we've got technology and we've got democracy and we've got economic growth, and every day in every way things are getting better and better. We're building the kingdom one day at a time, and if only those Democrats or those Republicans or those "fill in the blank" would get out of the way we could build the kingdom much faster. But, says Wright, that's not what Jesus was talking about when he talked about the kingdom, and here again, when we think about the kingdom the wrong way we end up thinking about Jesus the wrong way.

So what did Jesus have in mind when he talked about the kingdom? Wright suggests that when Jesus spoke of the kingdom he did so in terms of the "already" and the "not yet." The kingdom is in some sense *already* present, *and* the kingdom is in some sense *not yet* fully present. The reign of God is what happens when God is immediately and personally present in and to the whole of creation. The kingdom is what happens when the glory and the holiness and the power of God covers the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2.14). In one sense the reign of God has already begun, and in another it has not yet begun.

Those who bear the fruits of righteousness are those whose lives bear witness in the *present* to the reign of God as it will be in the *future*. Let me say that again: those who bear the fruits of righteousness are those whose lives bear witness in the present to the reign of God as it will be in the future. In other words, those who bear the fruits of righteousness are those whose lives are ordered, not by the standards and values of the present moment, but by the wisdom, the holiness, and the power of God as it will one day be manifest in the world. Not in some far off, immaterial, timeless existence: here, when the whole creation is remade in the image of Christ.

If we don't feel living that way to be a challenge, it means we have let go of one end of the rope: either we let go of the "already" end of the rope and live as if nothing in the present matters, or we let go of the "not yet" end of the rope and live as if the present moment is all we have.

It can be incredibly challenging to live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God. This is perhaps especially the case when we are confronted by inexplicable loss, by senseless acts of violence, by intractable disagreements that lead to hostility and conflict, or by our consistent inability to overcome seemingly perennial problems that result in the dispossession and suffering of the most vulnerable among us.

In fact, the challenge of living in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the reign of God is a challenge only God can overcome. Left to ourselves, we will either lose ourselves in flights of fancy and imagination, or fall into despair, or vacillate back and forth between fantasy and despair.

This is why the point Jesus made to the chief priests and religious elders is so important: bearing the fruit of righteousness requires continual repentance, and it requires attending to the work God has done and *continues* to do even today through his anointed messiah, Jesus. Repentance is not just a one-time event, a single contrite expression of feelings of guilt; repentance involves the ongoing reorientation of our lives from one set of values and priorities to a different set of values and priorities. Doing that requires constantly growing in our understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us and for the world. The closer we get to him, the more transformed our lives will be, and the more we will bear the fruits of righteousness.

C.S. Lewis once suggested that when the fullness of the kingdom appears, the veil will be lifted and we will see the transcendent reality that supports and sustains this world but that now lies hidden just beyond our sight. For some, this will be a wonderful experience. For others, this will be a horrible experience. For those whose lives have produced the fruit of righteousness, the consummation of the kingdom will be the fulfillment of all their hopes and dreams and hard work. For those whose lives have not produced the fruit of righteousness, the consummation of the kingdom will be a time of terrible judgment and loss and regret.

So let us heed the words of St. Paul and regard everything as loss when compared to the surpassing value of knowing Jesus. Let us be willing to endure the loss of all things for the sake of being found in him. Let us learn how to share with him even in his suffering so that we might share with him in his resurrection. Let us make him our own, for he has made us his own.

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