

Christian Reception

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the December 17, 2000 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of Luke, the 20th chapter, verses 9 to 19.

The title of the message is Christian Reception. If you would open your Bibles please to Luke chapter 20 on page 79 in the New Testament.

I just want to say two things by way of introduction. The first is that with the blessing and encouragement of the trustees and church committee, the Short family are going to be having Christmas in Australia.

[1 : 22] Some time ago I agreed to speak at a couple of youth conventions at the end of January. And Bronman's brother was married last Saturday so she and the boys are already there.

Parents anniversary, all sorts of things. And it's the first year that I've been away from you at Christmas time since I've been rector. And I still feel a little guilty about it.

Although I've got a lot of other things that I should be more guilty about and so I'm hardly noticing it. I am a little insecure about how glad the staff and trustees were for me to go away.

The second thing to say is that this morning the reading was Zephaniah 3 was supposed to be preached on and I had a look at it during the week and I frankly cannot understand it.

And so I've decided to preach on Luke 20. So I commend Luke 20 for you as you prepare for Christmas. Let's have a look at it together.

[2 : 19] This is the last parable that Jesus told. It's only a couple of days before he dies and it's perhaps the most transparent of all his parables and it tells us about a great clash between God and humanity and it explains why Jesus came to die.

Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem a day or two before. He's in trouble with the authorities again. He's cleared out the temple. And in verse 2 of chapter 20, the scribes and Pharisees say, tell us by whose authority or by what authority you do these things.

And the parable is part of Jesus' answer and it's a remarkable parable. Jesus takes the opportunity to step right back and look over the history of the world in the past and look toward the future and explain why his coming is crucial, central and climactic and forever changes God's relation with us. And I think it's important as we celebrate this Christmas to understand Jesus' understanding of Christmas. Jesus tells us three things. The first is the background or the reason for Christmas and if you look down verse 9 and following, you'll recall this very simple story about a man who owned a vineyard.

And he planted it himself and let it out to tenants and then he sent one of his servants to collect what was owed. And unbelievably, the tenants of the vineyard take the servant and they refuse to pay and they beat him.

[3 : 52] And in those days, if that had happened, that would be the end of the story. But in an act of extraordinary kindness, the owner sends a second servant. This time they not only beat him, but they treat him shamefully.

And then a third time, the owner sends a servant and the tenants take the servant and wound him, leaving him permanently injured. And of course, to anyone familiar with the Old Testament, the story is instantly recognisable.

We read it in Isaiah chapter 5. This is a picture of Israel. The vineyard is God's people. He has planted it. He has created it. He's chosen them for himself.

Bound himself to them in love. And he expected fruit, righteousness, but instead he received violence. And so God sends servants, the prophets, to remind them of what they owe him and they reject the prophets and treat them shamefully.

But it would be a great mistake to think that this only refers to Israel. Jesus is not just describing Israel, of course. He's describing every person on the planet.

[4 : 56] And the question that the parable puts to us is this. Who owns the world? Do we own it or does God? If it's ours, then we can make the rules and we can do what we wish.

But if the world is God's, then we need to treat him properly or get rid of him completely. You just think this through. If we are the owners of the vineyard, then we can believe what we like and behave as we choose.

And anyone who comes along and tells us that we're tenants better look out. Anyone who tells us that God owns us and that we owe him our obedience ought to be seen as an enemy of our self-expression and freedom.

If we do own this world, there's absolutely no reason why we shouldn't go ahead and clone human beings and promote fetal tissue research. But if God is the owner, then that makes us tenants and stewards and it makes us accountable to him.

It means we need to look for the prophets and listen to their words. If God is the owner, we're not free to believe and behave as we choose. And if we've lived as though God is irrelevant, we owe him a huge back rent.

[6 : 09] And you know, from beginning to end, the Bible teaches us, of course, that everything that we enjoy in this life comes to us from the hand of God. And that God created this world by himself, on his own, out of nothing.

And he has set us in this wonderful world to be his stewards and his representatives. And what a fantastic part of his vineyard we live in. I don't know if you ever thought about it.

God's goodness and kindness to us are overwhelming. The natural beauty and the resources that we have around us. You and I live in a place of freedom and security. You and I expect to have three meals a day, which puts us in a minority on this planet.

Have you ever stopped and simply said to God, thank you for this marvellous world? Or do you live as the tenants in this story, as though it belongs to you, as though it's yours and mine by right, not entrusted by God?

Ask yourself, when you make decisions in life, do you seek the wisdom of God? Do you seek to have the words of the prophets guide you? Or are you living with suspicion towards God?

[7 : 20] Jesus says, what's wrong with the world, what's wrong with the vineyard is not that we haven't quite got there with our technology. It's not that we're evolving and need to evolve better. It's not our social political problems.

The problem is simple. It's this, that like the people in this vineyard, we have replaced the owner and we want to be the owner and not just tenants.

And we resent anyone telling us that someone else might be the owner. Last year, the New York Times magazine ran a poll. It polled people in 50 of the states of the US and it asked them about their inner lives and their religious beliefs and their sexual mores, how they find happiness and how they construct morality.

And there are two conclusions. One is, Americans have entered the age of autonomy. That's what the whole article was called. Suspicious of moral absolutes, morality is now a matter of consumer choice.

Americans don't want a strong God or strong rules. They want to decide for themselves what's right and good and meaningful. And the second conclusion was that Americans have a firm belief in the intrinsic goodness of human beings.

[8 : 31] that deep down underneath, human nature is kind, good and loving. Now, of course, that's south of the border and that has nothing to do with the way that we think here.

Although it would go a long way to explaining why we glorify our poets and pundits who extol our autonomy and celebrate our emancipation from God and the narrow clutches of his rules and take ownership of the vineyard.

And all the while, God continues to shower his blessings upon us. He sends us his prophets. He sends us his messengers. Instead of destroying us or throwing us out of creation, he makes repeated attempts to win us over.

And every attempt is a measure of his love for us. None of us would be here this morning if it wasn't for God's love. He has sent people into our lives who pray for us.

Has it brought us back to him? Each time God is saying to us, here I am. Do not push me aside. This is not your world. It's mine. You are my stewards.

[9 : 37] You were not meant to live independently of me. And this is who Jesus understands we are. We are tenants. We owe our existence to God. We are accountable to him.

We owe him a debt of moral obedience. He created the vineyard and he has shown us almost ludicrous kindness and patience to bring us back to himself. And this is the backdrop of Christmas. Well then secondly, the reality of Christmas. If you return to the parable, you see the owner asking himself in verse 13, what shall I do? And he says this, I will send my beloved son.

It may be that they will respect him. The God who has given us opportunity after opportunity now gambles with his most precious one.

This is very important as we come to Christmas. Do you not find it incredible that God the Father should send his only son into our vineyard? And I'll tell you what it says.

[10 : 41] It means that from now on, the struggle between God and his world suddenly becomes more serious. The entry of the son into the world at that first Christmas means that from God's side, the stakes have been raised forever.

God is seeking a way with us that he has never sought before. He is sending his dearest one for us with the hope that we might turn back to him. Jesus is the son who has come to seek us and to save us.

And you see, Christmas is not just a sign of God's love for us. It is a sign of the incredible seriousness with which he takes each one of us. And it's stunning that Jesus puts himself at the centre of the parable and calls himself my beloved son, exactly the words that Jesus heard from the Father at his baptism.

And Jesus is saying that all the prophets, they were servants of God, but I am the son who has come. He's fully aware of his own uniqueness. Yes, he's human, but he's aware that the fullness of God dwells in him bodily.

He's not just one with religious insight. He is the son of God born in human flesh. And while the prophets all spoke a message from someone else, he speaks because he is the son.

[11 : 57] That's what all the fuss, of course, is about Christmas. It is the son of God entering our world, sent from the Father. That's why the angels burst the night sky. Today is born for you a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

That's why God conceives a baby in the womb of the Virgin Mary. That's why the prophets are all fulfilled. This is how Jesus understands his coming into the world.

It's nothing more than the loving initiative than God the Father, the master of the vineyard, coming to the tenants to tell them that they are tenants and give them a chance for a new start.

And there's no excuse for not recognising him as the divine son. He heals the sick. He gives sight to the blind. He gives hearing to the deaf. He walks on water. He feeds 5,000.

He raises the dead. He is the son of God with all the authority of God. Do you find it amazing that God should treat us with such dignity that he should give us his dearest one and make himself vulnerable to us in this way?

[12 : 58] And God looked at his world when he sent the son and says wistfully, perhaps they will respect him. And I think he looks at the world and says the same thing now.

The reality of Christmas. And thirdly and finally, the result of Christmas. Verse 14. When the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, This is the heir.

Let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours. And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.

When they heard this, they said, God forbid. But he looked intently at them and he said, What then is this that is written? The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

Do you know, when the Jewish priests brought Jesus to Pilate, they said this, We have a law and according to that law, he ought to die because he has made himself to be the son of God.

[14 : 03] And so he was crucified in the supreme act of contempt for God to take ownership of the vineyard. And while it's references, firstly, to the Jewish nation, we cannot hide behind the fact that it happened 2,000 years ago.

We too are tenants in God's world. And while we were not, it was not our hands that hammered in the nails, we were there when they crucified our Lord.

And what Jesus is saying to us is this, that now that he has come, the only way that we can live our lives apart from God is to murder Jesus in our hearts.

The only way for us to continue living in rebellion to the son of God is to say, I'm going to do away with him as far as I am concerned. If we're careless about forgiveness, it means we're murdering him in our hearts.

If we try to play God and live our lives as though we are the owner and we make the decisions, we murder him in our hearts. Jesus is saying we either honour him and embrace God or we run our own lives.

[15 : 06] And that is why Jesus finishes with this stunning text from the Old Testament. The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. Jesus is God's stone and he was rejected then and he remains rejected now but God has taken that cornerstone and has made him the key so that everything God does now is built around him.

Jesus is the key to all that God does. Turning back to God of course means, I love this picture, it doesn't mean taking the cornerstone and putting him into your life.

It means dismantling the apparatus of your life and moving it across and building on that stone there. It means a new heart and a new life. The good news of course is that a murder in the heart can be made right by a change of heart.

That the gospel is great good news if you accept it and very bad news if you reject it. Because God will not tolerate our rebellion forever. There is a day coming when Jesus will come and the way in which we have responded to him will determine our eternal destiny.

If we walk away from him and insist on our autonomy, he will give it to us. If we continue to tell him leave me alone, leave me alone, ultimately he will, he says. You see God is fundamentally seeking to reach us.

[16 : 31] He has demonstrated his love for us by creating us and placing us in the vineyard. He has shown us his love through the voice of the prophets. He has shown us his love by sending his son and he continues to demonstrate his love by warning us of the consequences of rejecting him.

That's why we gather here this morning to remember that this world is God's and not ours, to give thanks to him for this brilliant world, to recognise that we have pushed him aside and in a moment when we confess our sins together to acknowledge we've played the role of owner and we've done it very badly.

God is full of love and in his love he does something that defies our imagination. He sends his own son into our world. I want to encourage you as we approach this Christmas to heed and to accept the wisdom of Jesus in this his last parable that God owns the totality of our lives that he is rightly Lord in every domain of our lives Monday to Saturday that as we draw close to that day we remember the incomprehensibility of the love of God and the length to which he will go to draw us back to himself.

We cannot come to terms with Christmas until we see ourselves as the tenants in this story and accept our role. The invitation is to turn back to him and to thank him for his goodness and to surrender everything that we have and everything that we are and to build our lives and to build our church community on Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. This MP3 sermon along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohnschaughnessy.org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

[18 : 47] We hope that this sermon on the web has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you.