**4 October | 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 21:33-43 |**

**Parable of the Tenant Farmers**

Jesus has entered Jerusalem. He tells three parables in response to the fierce attack upon himself by the Jewish leaders – the Two Sons, last week’s reading, today’s parable, and the Wedding Feast, next week. They leaders regarded themselves as the official stewards of Israel’s heritage. The allegory translates into God as land-owner, two groups of servants are the prophets of Israel (earlier and later), and the son is Christ. An exact outline of redemptive history is spelled out by Matthew. Stoning was the classic death of a prophet; the son is killed outside the vineyard as Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem. By their own choice, the elders put themselves outside God’s saving plan. The vineyard is given anew to those who would produce fruits, the new building, the Church.

In the tradition of the prophets, God’s messengers, Jesus is to be put to death in Jerusalem. Israel is God’s vineyard as today’s Psalm 80 asserts. Tenant farming was a common practice in the time of Jesus, indicative of a failing economy and debt slavery. The three servants (prophets) meet increasing violence as they seek some returns for their master from the vineyard. The killing of the Son is their most horrendous act, and the consequences are catastrophic, their own destruction. This is a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, an event that took place in the year 70. Clearly, Matthew, knowing how it all turned out, takes a parable Jesus told and turns it into a full-blown allegory of the death of Jesus and its consequences for the Jewish leaders.

**11 October | 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 22:1-14 | The Wedding Banquet**

A royal wedding parable needs a marriage feast and a wedding garment. As Jesus moves closer to his Passion we hear crisis parables that call for a decision before it is too late. The wedding feast for the son reminds us of the son from last week’s parable of the wicked tenants who killed the son. Again we have servants, many of them as befits a king. They represent the prophets of the Old Testament, sent by God to call the people to a wedding feast, one of the oldest images of heaven, the eternal banquet. There is an urgency about the invitation; the meal is hot on the table. But the invitation is rejected, made light of, and even worse, injury is added to insult by the killing of the servants. The angry king then sends out his troops to avenge their deaths by putting the murderers to death and burning their city.

The hand of Matthew is evident in this detail of the destruction of the city, Jerusalem. This parable reads clearly without the addition of verses 6 and 7, from “while the rest seized his servans….to burned their city”. This is clear from the same food on the table still being available after a military campaign! A new group of servants, now the early Christian missionaries, go out into the thorough-fares, the streets and lanes of the world, to gather in Jews and Gentiles, bad and good, to fill the wedding hall. But Matthew extends this allegory of salvation history to the end times, when the king will come in to the banquet to find whether we have lived out our baptismal call (the wedding garment). That only one was found without, should be seen as a source of encouragement rather than dismay.

**18 October | 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 22:15-21 | Lawful Taxes**

Having just completed three parables of crisis, we now have four weeks of conflict stories. Today is the first one, the question concerning tribute to Caesar. We see Jesus portrayed as a wisdom teacher, needing the wisdom to escape the traps set for him and turn the tables on his enemies, and give some important teaching of his own. A serious problem for the Jews was paying the hated poll tax levied on all Jews regardless of income, to an occupying power. People were taxed by both religious and civil authority. Religious authority cast those poor who could not pay the Temple tax into the role of excluded ‘sinners’. Rome could collect its taxes through military might. This attempt to trap Jesus sought a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer. A positive answer would brand him a collaborator with Rome; a negative answer would make him a revolutionary. It is this trickery that the reading calls malice. Jesus turns the trap back on themselves when he asks for the coin used for the poll tax. As it contained the head of Caesar, the Roman god, with an inscription, a respectable Pharisee should not have been carrying it. The ordinary denarius used in Palestine bore no such image out of consideration for pious Jews.

Jesus’ response not only avoids the trap, but delivers a teaching about accepting the political order as long as it respects its relationship to God’s sovereignty. The coin may carry the emperor’s image; humanity carries God’s image and therefore belongs to God. Jesus not only escapes the dilemma but goes on the attack by calling for them to produce the coin with Caesar’s image on it. They carry around the offensive coinage while Jesus does not. They are shown as already collaborating, whereas Jesus’ own position is not disclosed. Jesus goes beyond their terms of reference by setting responsibility to the civil power (which he does not deny) within the broader and higher framework of obedience to God.

**25 October | 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 22:34-40 |**

**The Greatest Commandment**

The question of the greatest commandment of the Law is presented as a further attempt on the part of the Pharisees to put Jesus to the test. It was a question well debated between the Sadducees (who believed only in the Law and the Prophets, and not in the traditions of the rabbis), and the Pharisees (who believed in the Law of Moses and in the 613 rabbinical traditions). The answer of Jesus gives us the two great commandments that summarize the way we are to live our religion and life. The Pharisees use a legal expert to engage Jesus in a dispute over the ‘greatest commandment’, although every commandment was equally binding. They seek to lead him into making a statement on the basis of which they could accuse him of abolishing the Law (5:17).

Jesus’ answer comes from the Shema (Deut 6:4-9) to which he adds Lev 19:18 as being like the first. The two commandments are inseparable, for one cannot love God without loving every person as a child of God. These two commandments focus on a loving relationship as the basis for interpreting all law and the prophets. The distilling of the Torah (Law, Teaching) to a single, all-embracing command, whether love of God or neighbour, was recognised in Judaism within the Ten Commandments that saw the ‘two tables’ division of those dealing with God and those dealing with one’s neighbour. Jesus reaches here for a radical unity: in loving God with all one’s heart and soul and mind (one’s whole being and life-energy) this is inseparable from an active love on our part for those whom God loves in the way God loves them, with a love that is compassionate and extends even to those hostile to us.