

18th Sunday after Pentecost

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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

A barrister, Alexandra Wilson, was recently mistaken three times in quick succession in a British Court as a defendant. She was shouted at and spoken to rudely. She lodged a complaint, which was upheld, on the grounds that these three mis-identifications were because she was black. We live in a society where people experience everyday rejections because of the colour of their skin. In this story, Jesus tackles the issue of unfair rejection using the metaphors of murder, being beaten, and being stoned. For Alexandra Wilson, that was not the case, but for too many these are not metaphors, but a reality of the conflict in which they live daily.

Text

Matthew 21:33-46

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?’

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Comment

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’

Dealing with rejection may be one of the hardest experiences of a human life. When we feel the rejection of an individual, an institution or a group we are challenged to find a way to manage that negative experience. We might be right to turn the rejection around, or to accept it and move on. In this story of the Wicked Tenants the murder of the vineyard owner’s son is the rejection which Jesus challenges head-on but there are other rejections and murders here that I think we should think about this week.

The endemic nature of slavery in biblical society is not questioned in this story. The vineyard owner’s use of his slaves is not queried, and that they are beaten, stoned and murdered is clearly of less importance to him than the murder of his son and heir.

Many of us have been deeply moved by the resurgence of racist polemic in the past six months. The hashtag #BLM, or Black Lives Matter, has divided American society, with anti-racist protests being driven into by those who have the opposing view. In the UK, the question of slavery has again been raised and statues of those who supported slavery have been toppled. The historian, Professor David Olusoga made the very clear argument that British obsession with slavery has in some senses made the British public less attuned to everyday racism. His argument is that if we focus on slavery the problem becomes one which happens overseas, whereas, if we look at everyday racism we see this happens here, continuously.

The example he gives is of the popularity of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ in the UK in the nineteenth century, a book that outsold Charles Dickens, Janet Austen, and Walter Scott. In immersing themselves in the ‘wicked tenants’ of American slave traders, British people could distance themselves from the slavery from which they directly profited in sugar, cotton, tea, and many other products widely sold and used in Victorian society. The wealth from these slavery-dependent products is still in circulation in our society today, and so is the damaging and pervasive racist views and racist behaviour which underpinned the structure of Victorian slavery.

How we read a text informs how we view the contextual understanding of our society. If we allow a ‘Victorian’ view of slavery, as a distant issue which affects people very different from ourselves, then we misread this text. Let us consider the black people and people of colour who are oppressed, held back, or victims of racist crimes in our society not represented by the ‘slaves’ in this narrative but instead represented by the son and heir, as ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’. In this reading the beaten, stoned and murdered ‘slaves’ are those Christians who have tried to raise a voice against racism (which might include ourselves?), the wicked tenants are people who hold racist views or commit crimes of racist motivation. Jesus is the black voice looking for justice, the son murdered, the black woman shot

in her home, the lynched, the dispossessed, the protestor killed by a car driven in anger; Jesus is the suffering on the cross of all those who suffer in this world but are a cornerstone for the kingdom of heaven.

In our reading of the story black people and people of colour are the rightful heirs of their inheritance. There is no room now to suggest that skin colour, cultural background, or ethnicity makes one group more deserving than another. The rejection of the cornerstone by the builders is now triumphantly turned around and the rejected people raised up. 'This is the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.'

Response

Are there other bible stories we could re-read in this way having black voices and black narratives at the centre of our reading of the story?

What is it important to revisit in our 'Victorian' sentimental view of slavery?

What would you like to change about modern society, is there some way in which you can do this?

Prayer

God of justice, turn the tide of racism, racist violence, racist crime. Enable us to be ambassadors for the true kingdom and to fight for justice in our own lives, on behalf of others, and in our hearts.

That the cornerstone which was rejected may turn out to be the most important of all. Through Jesus Christ, incarnate, man of colour, son of humanity.

Amen

Further Reading

'In Black and White' Alexandra Wilson

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: