

Intro:

Last week, pastor Patti led us into the events immediately following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday as we celebrate it – Where we saw Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple, correcting and challenging the chief priests and teachers, cursing a fig tree, and teaching with a parable. As we are well aware, Palm Sunday leads us into Jesus' final week including his suffering and death. And in the Matthew account of this final week, we are able to see why the religious powers of the day disliked Jesus, and even felt threatened by his teaching.

Today's scripture text is a continuation of Jesus' conversation with and condemnation of these religious leaders. Listen carefully and you will hear Jesus proclaiming that he is the son of the Landowner – understood as the son of God. Just as we remember Jesus' transfiguration and God's voice claiming Jesus as God's beloved son, Jesus now openly accepts this position, knowing that it ultimately means that his is going to be put to death in a matter of days. But after he is rejected, he will be exulted and placed in a position of honor by God.... Hear the Word from Matthew 21 -

Matt. 21:33 "Now listen to another story. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ³⁴ At the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³⁵ But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. ³⁶ So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for him, but the results were the same. ³⁷ "Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.' ³⁸ "But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' ³⁹ So they grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

⁴⁰ "When the owner of the vineyard returns," Jesus asked, "what do you think he will do to those farmers?" ⁴¹ The religious leaders replied, "He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest."

⁴² Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing, and it is wonderful to see.' ⁴³ I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on. "

⁴⁵ When the leading priests and Pharisees heard this parable, they realized He was telling the story against them--they were the wicked farmers. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest Him, but they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.

Jesus' parable of the evil tenants prompts an emotional response from the hearers. Did you feel it? The landowner purchases and prepares the land, planting a vineyard and a space for processing wine, building protection around it to keep it safe and secure. Then he rents the space out for workers to live and build their livelihoods – leaving them in charge. When the harvest time comes, the landlord sends some servants to collect what is due the landlord. These servants are met with abuse and even murder... so the landlord sent some more servants who met the same fate.

Finally the landlord sent his son, thinking they would surely listen to him, but the son is murdered by the tenants who reasoned that if the heir is killed, they might be able to keep the vineyard for themselves.

So... when the landlord returns, what do you think he will do to these evil tenants? _____ The religious leaders listening to Jesus' story were indignant and responded that these tenants should suffer a horrible death at the hands of the landlord. But before they realized what was happening, Jesus cast the religious leaders as the evil tenants who rejected God by rejecting the prophets and at that moment – by rejecting God's own son.

As you can imagine, the chief priests and teachers did not appreciate what Jesus said about them – they were not exactly endeared to Jesus... as a matter of fact, they wanted to arrest him on the spot, but they were too afraid of the people – many who believed that Jesus was a prophet.

Remember, that this is the same reason that they would not answer Jesus' question about John the Baptist, because they were afraid of the people who thought John was a prophet.

Cornerstone:

In the text, we hear Jesus referring to two Hebrew scriptures: **Psalm 118:22-23 and Isaiah 28:16** – which prophesy the coming messiah as the chief cornerstone – the primary stone that stabilizes and holds the entire structure together. (read both)

Psa 118:22-23 The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; 23 the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Isa 28:16 So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.

The cornerstone is the most important stone when building a structure. It is not like our modern cornerstones that are used to show when the building was erected. The stone referred to here keeps the structure in place much like a support beam. So the builder would search to find the perfect stone for this job. The Psalmist and Prophet says that the Lord will provide this important stone. Now Jesus is presented as “the stone that the builders rejected which has become the cornerstone”.

These chief priests and teachers of the law were overlooking Jesus and taking exception to much of what he said, because they wanted to be the owners of the faith – they wanted to be the right and righteous ones. They believed that their understanding of God was the only understanding, and anyone who took exception to their teaching was against the things of God. They were so sure of themselves, that they were unable to see Truth when it stood in front of them. They rejected the best stone that God had given them for the building of their faith, for God had come to them personally, and all they could see was a threat to their way of life – a threat to their religion. So they rejected the Son and ultimately took him out of the city and put him to death. This, because of the distorted belief that they were the sole protectors of the faith.

How often has the historical church overlooked Jesus because the focus was on some particular religious practice or specific words of a doctrinal statement. How often throughout history do we see Christians fighting Christians because of differences of opinion or interpretation. When we believe that our primary purpose is to protect the faith or build a wall around ourselves to keep out impurities... when we focus our attention on condemning others, then we overlook Jesus as the key cornerstone of the church, and put something of much lesser value and quality in his place. When Jesus is in place of the cornerstone, all the other stones fit into place (see 1 Peter 2:4-5) *As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

There is much truth in the song we sang before the sermon: “turn your eyes upon Jesus... and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace”. When we keep our eyes on Jesus – when we keep him as our primary foundation, we will not go wrong, and all the other things grow appropriately dim.