

**Pentecost 18**  
**4/10/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Ezekiel 34:1-4, 9-23, 29-31**

**Psalm 80**

**Matthew 21:33-46**

**The stone the builders rejected**

Sermon preached by Andrew Gador-Whyte

---

Ezekiel's image of the shepherds living at the expense of their sheep reminds us painfully of what perennially seems to characterise the exercise of authority in the world.

It's not difficult to find instances of these kinds of shepherds in our times, intent on maintaining their own power and security. Shepherds who lie and shamelessly divide their nations with impunity. Shepherds who systematically imprison and persecute a religious minority.

We find ourselves implicated in a divided world of frustrated hope, in the pursuit of the good through the silencing of my neighbour, in the serving of the many by the exclusion of the victim.

It is under such violence, idolatry, pride and vanity that our whole humanity has been labouring. God has given his chosen people to be the light of this dark world – light in the darkness of a humanity characterised by such shepherds.

God promises that human authority will be transformed to serve the healing of the nations. And so God charges the shepherds of his chosen people with the task of allowing God to give through them.

The God who ordinarily chooses to work through human relationships has promised that the nations will find their healing through the life of this people. Through the holiness of the children of Jacob, the nations will come to be purified from the worship of our own security to worship the living God.

And so, Ezekiel reserves his sharpest words of judgement for the leaders of his own people. Those who lead the worship of the people have been given their authority as a source of reconciliation. But their exercise of authority too has become a defence of their own needs against their neighbours, the making of victims, the denial of their own dependence.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus has entered the temple to cleanse and to judge. He comes not to destroy or to displace the worship of his people. He comes rather to cleanse that worship of the violence under which it labours. And he comes to his people to reveal *himself* as the true shepherd of the sheep.

In the parable of the vineyard, it is clear that Jesus is denouncing the violence in the tenants' living to meet their own needs and security over and against others. But there is also a sacrificial image here. For the nations, sacrifice has been a manipulation of the gods to their own ends. But for Israel, sacrifice is the free lifting up of their life in praise.

In sending one lot of slaves after another, and finally his son, the landowner seeks that kind of sacrifice of the tenants – a rendering to God of the whole of life as gift; a reorienting of the various purposes of life towards reconciliation; a new vision of my relationship to my neighbour as one of pure gift and interdependence.

What are we to make of what Jesus says, ‘the kingdom will be taken away from you and given to a nation bearing its fruits’? What must be ruled out here is any sense that the Jewish people are being replaced by others. The inclusion of the Gentiles in Christ is never to be understood as a supplanting of the Jews as God’s people.

Jesus has come to reconcile all humanity by fulfilling and recapitulating the promise to the tribes of Judah. Jesus’ coming in our humanity confronts the fear and despair of the nations with a word of mutual belonging and abundant life. And his coming confronts all of us who would make the purity or success of our lives the prerequisite for solidarity.

Jesus’ words of judgement here pick up the words of the prophet Daniel. In the Book of Daniel, the temple has been defiled by a pagan invader. Daniel promises the return of the Ancient One to take up his throne, inaugurating a kingdom which all nations will participate and where God’s people will in some way rule and judge. He writes:

*The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom and all dominions shall serve and obey them (Dan 7:27)*

When Jesus speaks of giving the kingdom to a nation bearing its fruits, he is speaking of restoring the life of the nation of Israel to itself, over and against the desolating sacrilege set up in the holy place. And he is speaking too of all the nations who will be incorporated into the rule of the Lamb who was slain, who have become sharers in the promise.

Jesus enters the temple as its unrecognised Lord, cleanses the temple and denounces the unfaithfulness of the leaders of the people. His parable pierces our hearts as those complicit in the rejection of Christ, in our refusal to offer the whole of our life together as gift.

Against the blindness of those enmeshed in the world’s violence, the identity of Jesus is disclosed. As Ezekiel writes:

*I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them... (Ez 34:10)*

*I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (Ez 34:23)*

Jesus is revealed as the true shepherd of the sheep, who comes not to be served but to serve. Jesus comes as a slave, as the one cast aside, whom in the blindness of our fear, rivalry and pride we did not recognise as the true object of our obedience and the true source of our reconciliation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The unifying principle of the people’s worship, the centre binding together all of creation – and its culmination in Israel’s praise – that centre is revealed in the outcast, in the slain victim, in the shameful death of the cross.

The one who was crushed even under observance of the Law is revealed as the one coming to restore all things by his broken body. The one who was cut off, sealed behind the stone, is revealed as the one coming in confrontation of all that divides the world from love. He is the one breaking open the tombs. He is the victim rising to meet his killers with the judgement of love, with true reconciliation.

And so, perhaps, opening ourselves to God's grace, giving ourselves up to be shepherded by this shepherd, is to open ourselves to be confronted by this stone; to allow this rejected stone to be an obstacle to us; to allow ourselves to fall upon it.

We learn to deny our own will, or rather to allow our will to be judged and perfected by Jesus Christ. We learn the humility and contrition that trembles at the word of reconciliation and renewed holiness.

Through a life of obedience in prayer; through growing into the self-denial we call hospitality; through receiving the sacramental life of the church as for our neighbour's healing; we come to see ourselves in greater clarity.

We come to know ourselves even as those crushed by this stone – or to put it another way, as those who have been under the deep waters of baptism where one has gone before us.

We learn to pay attention to Jesus Christ, who will often meet us as a stumbling block to our insularity, our fear or our complacency. We find our lives are marked by stumbling over this cornerstone. We learn to fall over this stone; to fall, not to be destroyed, but to fall as every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will fall; falling from blindness to sight, from rejection of the victim to acknowledgement of the crucified slave as the true form of authority and power.

Jesus' entry to Jerusalem and to the temple begin his movement towards the cross, where his body and the temple curtain will be torn open and the darkness of our humanity disclosed; where the rejected one, hanging on the tree, will be revealed as the Holy of Holies; where the light will stream from the Holy Place to reveal to Israel and all nations their healing:

Our healing found in the one we have pierced; Our common belonging found in the broken body.

At this table, in this covenant of peace,

*They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them;  
and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God.  
You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord  
God. (Ez 34: 30-31)*

\*\*\*