Albany Presbyterian Church

October 4th, 2026, **Matthew 21:33-46**

A few weeks ago, I shared my experience of visiting Port Arthur, a penal colony in Tasmania. I shared how I felt a strange sense of unease standing on this site, where the church stands in ruins. I learned that the colony's church faced constant conflict; not only did it have to contend with the cruel practices of justice of the time, but it also faced rivalries between churches and traditions. Something about this site, the remnant of the church, in a museum town today, together with the way that they saw the world- a questionable Christian view of God's mercy and grace- the sermons being preached there, convicts, and prison guards, officials that govern the colony town coming together to a service on Sundays. And its ministers, its traditions, the structures that hold things together. And what's left today. The stone walls, the building's frames, the windows that look out on the rest of the town.

I wonder how Jesus must have felt, standing in the temple in those last days before his crucifixion. He received a hero's welcome in Jerusalem, with shouts of hosanna and waving branches. Yet the growing fury of the religious leaders, the high priests and temple elders, came to him with complaint after complaint, seeking to stop Jesus, who was a threat to their authority; they became indignant now that he claimed to be the Son of God, the Messiah. They feared him because he was like John the Baptist; people saw Jesus as a prophet, and some even said he was John the Baptist, who had come back to life.

Confronted by the religious leaders, Jesus says in verse 32, "When John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes you claim to be sinners and outsiders, they did; and even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him." In verse 31, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you."

And in verse 43, "Therefore I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

And Jesus tells them a story to illustrate his point: a story about a Father who owns the vineyard, asking his two sons to go and work in his vineyard: the first one refused at first, but went later to work in the vineyard; the second says yes, but he didn't go, deceiving his father in complete disobedience.

Jesus asks: Which of the two did what the father wanted?

And he tells them yet another story: A man planted a vineyard; he planted fine vines, put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he rented it out to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time came, he sent his servants to collect his fruit from his vineyard. Only to have these tenants turn against him; they seized his servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned the third. But the man kept sending more servants, and the tenants did the same to all of them. At the end, the man sent out his own son, expecting their respect for him because he is his son, but the tenants, with their evil hearts, plotting to kill him for his inheritance, when he came, they threw him out of the field and killed him.

And to finish the story, Jesus asks them again what the owner of the vineyard will do when he returns. "Wretched end for the wretched," they answered.

Because Jesus was in the middle of the temple court teaching, this way of midrash was a style that they used; though it sounds unusual to us, hearing these parables, they might have thought that Jesus was talking about Isaiah 5, a very similar story, a parable, an allegorical song, in which God is the owner of a vineyard, the vineyard being the people of Israel and Judah. The owner clears the stones, plants choice vines, builds a protective stone wall and a watchtower, all set up for the best kind of grapes. But Isaiah's story was about Judah and Israel's failure to produce what was expected, although God, the owner of the vineyard, put so much care into it; instead of the best grapes, they produced horrible sour grapes.

But as Matthew says, when Jesus finished telling the parables, they became even more furious, because they realised it was not at all about Isaiah's story, but that Jesus was talking about them, the wicked tenants who deserve a wretched end; the second son who failed to do what his father asked.

So how do we read this story? What does God have for us in this story this morning?

First, I invite you to try to place yourself in the story:

Sometimes, you might be like me, feel like the servants sent to the vineyard to collect the fruit for the season. We might feel that we are treated badly, beaten, killed and stoned. Maybe we are with Jesus, rejected, harassed and thrown out. But Jesus says, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes." (taken from Psalm 118:22-23) And that though they rejected, made him look useless, a hindrance to the building of the Kingdom of God, Jesus was the Messiah; God planned for him to be the foundational cornerstone of his kingdom, the way and the truth to our salvation; he bore the weight of us, his church, aligning and joining together all the stones to make up a strong and sturdy house of God; Jesus is the cornerstone, bearing the weight of our sins, uniting us with him, with God, and with one another.

Secondly, this story warns that the kingdom of God will be taken away from us if we are like the tenant who thinks they own the vineyard, or who wants to be masters of the kingdom and refuses to hear God, keeping Jesus out and seeing him as the obstacle in the way.

The story invites us to reflect on our attitudes toward Jesus, toward God. It invites us to re-examine ourselves and our faith. Did any part of us want to be masters of our own life, the life of faith?

Lastly, Jesus declares this judgment: he says, he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.

The stone being Jesus, for those who stumble over Jesus, for whatever reason, whether it is pride, greed or doubt, Jesus shatters our self-reliance; obedience to our own desire, wanting to be autonomous, wanting what does not belong to us. The stone's work of shattering brings humble repentance and the way to become part of Jesus, built into the body of Christ, through whom we have forgiveness and redemption.

This is what Paul calls the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

Otherwise, the stone will be dropped down from above, crushing them into dust. This is an image of judgment from Daniel 2: a vision of a stone representing the power of God from heaven falls on a giant statue of gold, silver, and bronze representing rebellious humanity placing itself above God, crushing it to complete dust. And if they do not fall to pieces in repentance, God, the vineyard owner, will come; as they said, he will bring those wretches to a wretched end.

I wonder about the place of the church in the town of Port Arthur, which I walked into that day. And how God was present even in their suffering, with those who were rejected or condemned; And how much it is for us, how comforting it is that Jesus stands with us. He is our cornerstone, holding us together as his church, as his people.

And that we belong to God. We are not the masters of our lives, of our faith. We don't control the fruit of the Spirit. That is purely by God's grace we live, move and have our being.

Belonging to God and his Kingdom, with Jesus as our cornerstone, we are called to repentance: letting go of our ego, being transformed by the Holy Spirit, letting the Spirit of God and the knowledge of who Jesus is break us, and through repentance and forgiveness, we are made anew in Christ Jesus.

Despite past glory or past failure, we look to Christ with joy and thanksgiving: to come, to belong to life, love, and the hope of eternal life, thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray.