

MATTHEW 21:33-46
FAITH AND GOOD DEEDS

Which came first – the chicken or the egg? This is one of these great questions that people debate, but when you think you have the answer, someone has another view. If you have watched the film *Chicken Run* you might remember that two mice debate this very question at the end. It has to be the chicken, doesn't it, because the chicken produces the egg! But surely the chicken comes from the egg, so the egg has to come first. I wish you well trying to sort that one out! Which came first: God or us? We might think that is a much easier question because we know the answer from the Bible, but there are people around who will suggest that "God" is an idea that we have made up to support us when we're weak; God dances to our tune. I was in the Disney Store at the Gyle last week with my grandson and they show songs from Disney films on the big screen and it was the fantastic Robin Williams as the genie in *Aladdin* singing one of his big songs. The whole genie idea is that this enormously powerful character is at bidding of whoever rubs the lamp and grants you whatever you wish. Is that our idea of God, someone who will dance to our tune, who will be at our bidding to help us when we need help? Is "God" an idea that we have made up to help us survive life?

Augustine was one of the church fathers, from North Africa in the fourth century, but he didn't start out life as a Christian. He spent a good part of his life trying to find out what life was all about and tried all kinds of experiences: the pleasures of life, other religions, he dabbled in philosophy. One day, in his garden he read some verses from the end of Romans 13 and began to explore the Christian faith. Later, he wrote the classic book called *Confessions* and describes what he has discovered about the relationship between God and human beings: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you." We are made for God; we are made to love God and worship God; it is part of being human! In learning to love and worship God, we discover that God has loved us first and cares for us, but we are made to love God, to enjoy God, to worship God and that is our deepest fulfilment as human beings.

So how am I to live my life for God, if I am made for God? Isaiah wrote *The Song of the vineyard* in chapter 5, a song from God of His love for His people, but a love that was rejected. God builds His people, Israel; He is depicted as a farmer building a vineyard, but "*when I...*" (*Isaiah 5:4b*) "*The vineyard...*" (*Isaiah 5:7*) The people are made by God, are chosen by God, to love God and to love other people, to live in a good, right and just way, but they are rejecting all of that to create bloodshed and oppression in their world. It is a distressing picture of love rejected, of something good being destroyed, of love turning to ashes and God turning to judgement. It is not a happy picture; here is a people who forget that they are made for God and are living only for themselves, to satisfy their own ego, with a settled attitude of rejection towards God.

It is this picture that Jesus taps into with the parable of the tenants. Any Jews hearing the word 'vineyard' would begin to think of Isaiah 5 and ask "where is this taking us?" We're in the last week of Jesus' life; all of these conversations are in Jerusalem, probably in the temple precincts, as Jesus teaches, and answers questions, and gives people deep things to think about, and prepares His disciples for the idea that He will die. By the end of the week, He will be crucified and by Sunday He will be raised. This parable comes in answer to the question about authority and the Jewish leaders asking "why should we listen to you?" The parable of the tenants is another answer to that question and the Jews clearly get the message!

It is a story is about the tenants of the vineyard, who strike a deal with the owner; he goes off and they make the vineyard work, but then refuse to pay the rent. A succession of servants are sent; they come and are mistreated and the owner's demands for rent are ignored. This is clearly a short history of Israel and God's relationship with His people and their relationship with Him and how the people have ignored God. They ignored Him not just once or twice, but

it is a settled attitude – how can the people of God have a settled attitude that ignores God or rejects Him? Well, they managed it. The story ends with a question: “*What will...*” (*Matthew 21:40*) There is a sense of indignation – of course, this is what the owner should do. “*He will...*” (*Matthew 21:41*) “How dare they behave so badly; they deserve to be evicted! He needs tenants who will give him what he is due!”

But then the story becomes about them. It is not history anymore; this is here and now! This is about their rejection of God. “*Have you...*” (*Matthew 21:42*) Psalm 118 has this piece about a cornerstone that is rejected and the rejected stone become key! Then there is a kingdom that will be taken away from Israel and given to people who will embrace it whole-heartedly and produce fruit and respond to God in appropriate ways, the “Fruit of the kingdom”. Give them their due, the Jewish leaders at least see one thing, they see that this is all about them and how Jesus sees them; this is about His claim to be the Son in the story and that if they reject Him, they reject God! They see that, but rather than repent of their failure, they become angry and look to arrest Him. The conflict grows!

The tenants were meant to produce good fruit. For Isaiah, the fruit was bad – bloodshed and oppression leading to distress. For Jesus it was bad – people rejecting God, continually not listening, with a settled attitude of rejection, even of His Son when He came. Good fruit for Isaiah would have been justice and living in a way that was good and right; for Jesus it would have been listening for God’s voice and living by faith. “Faith and good deeds” is the simplest way of expressing this: “*Let us...*” (*Galatians 6:9*) Keep doing the good thing, keep living by faith in Jesus and keep doing what is good and right. It’s really quite simple! There is nothing complicated about the Christian life – trust Jesus as Saviour and obey Him as Lord; that is what we were made for, what we were made to be and made to do, and so fulfil our destiny in these very simple ways.

But how easily the church gets distracted! Bloodshed is still there in the history of the church: think of the crusades, the eleventh century church going to war to reclaim the holy sites, to win back Jerusalem from the infidel; was that a worthy aim? We would have seen armies of fully armoured knights and soldiers in a great train, marching East to fight huge bloody battles. Jesus says: “*Blessed are...*” (*Matthew 5:5*) or we get caught up in the minutiae of church life, to dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ and we spend hours and hours making sure that the right process is in place to do the right job and we see this as the work of the kingdom; Jesus talks somewhere about those who strain gnats but swallow camels, caught up in the minutiae but forgetting to love God and to love our neighbour. The Church that owns the gospel which says that “*There is...*” (*Galatians 3:28*) but for centuries has told women that they are second-class Christians and has denied any kind of ministry or leadership role to women based on a couple of obscure texts and be a church that has even openly supported discrimination and sectarianism. We have watched Jesus bless little children, but at times become a church that has pushed them to margins. Before we point finger at “the Church” – we are the church; we need to recognise these group failings and repent of our sins, these ways in which we have failed to honour God. Then there are our own personal failings...

People who will produce the fruit of the kingdom of God – what do these people look like? They are people, first of all, who live by faith. Faith is the key quality in the kingdom of God, that we believe in God and believe Jesus as our Saviour and trust Him. That kind of faith is the foundation of everything else! We are people of faith and then people who do good in the world, who love justice, who work for peace, who live good lives. Jesus has shown us these qualities by His own way of life; He has taught us this alternative lifestyle of faith, humility, grace, and being peace-loving people. Doing good in the world is not an add-on option; it is part of our DNA as Christians, it part of who we are, we were made for this and so we forgive, we care for people in need, we look to support those who are frail and fragile. When Christians are like this, two things happen: first of all, God is pleased because we are made for this;

secondly, people are drawn to Christians when we live like this because this way is so different from the world, and so full of value.

Do we see ourselves as members of a religious club? The Jews saw themselves like that, in a way; they were members of a club and it didn't matter what they did; they had their membership and nothing could go wrong for them. Is that how we see our religion, that we are members of a religious club and God will be our servant, a kind of genie to look after us when things go wrong? Is it something we do on a Sunday and we've always done it and it is good to do because it keeps the bad spirits away from the door? Is "God" an idea in our head that we have made up so that He can look after us when we're weak?

Or "you have made us for yourself" according to Augustine. We are made to love God, made for worship, made for relationship with God, a relationship that focuses on faith and good deeds. Do we see ourselves as people who are made to listen to God and to live in His ways, to follow Jesus and be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be? It is possible to reject that whole idea and to live in a settled attitude of rejection of Jesus; it is possible to find that attitude even in the Church. Faith and good deeds – this is Jesus' way for us; this is the kingdom of God way; this is the fruit of the kingdom; this is what we were made for!