

March 15, 2020

Mark 12:1-17

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Book of Mark is most likely the first of the four gospel books to be written, sometime in the late 60s CE. In this season of Lent we move to the second half of the gospel which focuses around the movement of Jesus towards his confrontation with the powers at Jerusalem. Today's selection follows and continues a section of conflict between Jesus and his political opponents: the religious leaders who support the foreign occupying power of Rome or who desire to regain their unrivaled power without getting arrested for sedition. They have been questioning Jesus (in chapter 11) and his authority, seeking to stop his growing popularity and emerging political movement among the people by making his look foolish, as a doomed revolutionary, or a lax hypocritical follower of Yahweh.

In Mark's telling of this life of Jesus these events occur after Jesus' triumphal entry (what we often call the story of Palm Sunday) which happens at the beginning of chapter 11. So this is the natural consequence of Jesus confronting the political powers who accommodate, endorse or reject the colonial - and heretical - presence of Rome in Israel.

THEM/THEY :: This whole scene is a continuing confrontation between Jesus and his political opponents (a grouping of religious leaders signifying the Sanhedrin - the first and greatest Jewish authority in the land) who question his authority in front of the public crowds that gather for his teaching. The immediate context is Mark 11:27-29 (just before today's section). "27 Again Jesus and the disciples came to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple, THE CHIEF PRIESTS, THE SCRIBES, AND THE ELDERS came to [Jesus] 28 and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" 29 Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things." Curiously we see that although the greatest power of the land, they fear the crowd, revealing their vulnerability to the social power of prophetic movements such as the popular uprising around Jesus. (Ched Myers. *Binding the Strong Man*.)

parables :: in the Ancient World the word designated a mode of speech distinguished by its power to convince. It could be a short saying, proverb or riddle; or an allegory or prophetic oracle. The parables of Jesus are an analogy. The parable story told is about one thing, but actually is talking about something else. Jesus often uses them in saying... "the kingdom of God is like..." Most of the parables we've seen in Mark (specifically chapter 4) are about agriculture and farming: a man who plants seed in his garden, a man whose garden grows in the day and the night, and a mustard seed. But Jesus isn't teaching the crowds (and us) about better farming techniques. Here too, Jesus is talking about more than what he appears to be talking about when he intertwines allegory, analogy and social realism.

¹ Then [Jesus] began to speak to **THEM** [*the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders*] in parables. "A man planted a **VINEYARD**, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ² When **THE SEASON CAME**, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the **VINEYARD**. ³ But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed.

⁴ And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. ⁵ Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a **beloved son**. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the **VINEYARD**. ⁹ What then will the owner of the **VINEYARD** do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the **VINEYARD** to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this scripture:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the *cornerstone*;

¹¹ this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?'"

¹² When **THEY** realized that he had told this parable against **THEM**, **THEY** wanted to arrest him, but THEY feared the crowd. So **THEY** left him and went away.

¹³ Then **THEY** sent to Jesus some Pharisees and some *Herodians* to trap him in what he said. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him,

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or should we not?” But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a *denarius* and let me see it.” ¹⁶ And they brought one. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What part of today’s story grabs you?**
- **Injustice is a large part of the two stories – in particular around land – who owned it and who could tax it. What is Jesus saying about the heart of God in terms of justice and injustice?**
- **Imagine you were one of the religious leaders, or in the larger spectator crowd...hearing the parable, or the teaching. How would you feel about Jesus? His words? His vision?**
- **Jesus talks about the emphasis on the people’s united response to live into God’s justice. How does that intersect with us today in our context, specifically in the quarantine season (kairos) of COVID-19?**
- **What invitation to walk, act, speak, or relate to others on the Way of Jesus do you hear in the text today?**



Much language used in the parable points back to earlier sections in the gospel of Mark and the body of the Bible.

VINEYARD :: was a well-known metaphor for Israel (fenced around by the law). Rooted in Isaiah 5:1-7

⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Recent archaeological discoveries have helped us to understand that at this point in time much of Galilee (from where Jesus comes) was owned by foreign landowners who rented the land back to tenants. This was forbidden by the Law as all of the land was thought to belong to God alone. [See for example- Psalm 85:1 “Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.” And Jeremiah 16:18 “ And I [the LORD] will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.” So here there seems to be a role-reversal: those who seem to get away with doing wrong in the world get the natural consequence of their ungodly actions and worldview.

“When **THE SEASON CAME** “ or “at **THE RIGHT TIME**” – the word **kairos** for time as in special, or particular moment is also – used in Mark 1:15 to talk about the work of Jesus: “¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the g’od news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “**THE TIME** is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

beloved son : this designation has already been used to talk about Jesus at his baptism and on the mountaintop in Mark 1:11 and 9:7.

cornerstone this is a direct quote from Psalm 118:22 which is a psalm about King David who was rejected and then restored by God as King

Herodians :: “meaning the household servants or sales of Herod, his officials or courtiers...and more generally all the supporters of Herod’s regime, whether or not they belong to an organized group or Party. Since the Herodian dynasty was supported by the Romans, they would probably have insisted on payment of taxes to Caesar.” (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*. p. 816)

denarius :: was the standard Roman silver coin used during the lifetime of Jesus. It was the Everyone knew that the coin contained a face, portrait or bust of the Emperor which would have been idolatrous to pious Jews as it was a graven image of a foreign leader who claimed to be a god.. Taxes must be paid to the Empire, but the coin was against the Law of God. Hence the trap: depending upon his response to the trick question Jesus is either guilty of sedition or lax in his religious teaching.