



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Stone that the Builders Rejected Luke 20:1-19

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August 2, 2015 – Trinity 9

Imagine a stranger turning up in our church on a Sunday morning. The service has already started. Maybe we're singing a hymn, maybe I'm in the middle of the sermon, or maybe we're just beginning the liturgy for the Lord's Supper and this stranger storms in and stops the hymn, angrily telling us that the words are all wrong, or he interrupts the sermon and accuses me of leading the sheep astray with false teaching, or pushes me away from the Table shouting that we're celebrating the Sacrament all wrong. He accuses us all of having turned the church—which God intended to be a house of prayer—into a house of heresy or a hideout of false prophets or a den of robbers. We'd all probably be upset, maybe even angry, and understandably so. Our hymns have been sung by Christians for centuries, ninety per cent of our liturgy is taken straight from the Bible and it's been prayed by Christians for five hundred years and many parts of it more than a thousand. And as for our priests and what they preach, we have bishops and standing committees and boards of examining chaplains to make sure that they're properly trained, that they're teaching the Bible, and to make sure that no one lays hands on them to ordain them too hastily. What right does a stranger have to upset our service and to tell us we're doing and teaching everything all wrong?

But then imagine, to make matters worse, after we ignored the stranger and went on with our singing and preaching and praying, this man came back every day during the following week and started teaching whomever would listen, telling them what the Bible *really* says and how we've had it all wrong for generations and for centuries.

This is something like what happened when Jesus entered the temple. There was an order to everything that went on there. People came from all over Judaea to worship and to offer their sacrifices. There was a hierarchy of priests who served in the temple and who assisted the people with their worship and sacrifices. Those priests and the guards who protected the temple answered to the chief priests. The ordinary priests were men like John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. They lived somewhere else, but once a year it was the time for their family or clan to serve in the temple, and so they would come to Jerusalem. These rank-and-file priests along with the guards who protected the temple and controlled the crowds answered to the chief priests and they answered to the high priest at the top. These were men with family and political connections; they had all the right credentials. Even the lowliest of the priests still had to come from the right tribe. Not just anyone could come and serve in the temple and those few who had done so in the past—and they were kings, not just “anybody”—were condemned for stepping out of bounds. King Uzziah had done many godly things, but then he became proud. He went into the temple to offer incense. He refused to listen to the priests when they tried to stop him, and as a result of his pride he was struck with leprosy—made permanently unclean and unable to ever enter the temple again.

Now, Jesus wasn't a complete stranger. Most people had heard of him, but as far as the priests were concerned, he didn't have the credentials or the authority to do what he did when he turned over the tables of the money changers and rebuked the people for having corrupted the temple. Jesus wasn't even a Levite—he wasn't even eligible to be part of the priesthood or temple authority. Luke says that he stayed in the temple and taught whomever would listen—and that many of the people were listening. Like any other rabbi, Jesus could teach, but even then, the rabbis who taught in the temple were generally well-known and respected. Again, Jesus was an outsider to them. It only made them angrier that what he was teaching turned their world upside-down. And so Luke left us, at the end of

Chapter 19, saying, “The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him.”

As Chapter 20 begins we see these men get an idea. We can imagine that whenever Jesus was teaching, at least a few of them were standing at the back of the crowd listening to what he was saying and getting angrier by the minute. Jesus was undermining everything they stood for. And listening to him, Luke says, they eventually dreamed up a trap. Look at Luke 20:1-2.

One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, “Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.”

At face value the question is legitimate. Just as we'd want to know by what authority someone might interrupt the worship and teaching in our church, the temple leadership had a right to ask by what authority Jesus disrupted the temple. But they already know his answer. They know his story. They've heard what he's said, they've heard what he's done, and they've heard who the crowds say that he is. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah—or at least he claims to be and lots of people believe him. And that's just it, they realise. If they can get Jesus to admit publically that he thinks he's the Messiah, they can go straight to the Romans and get him arrested. Men who claimed to be the Messiah were always trouble-makers for the Romans, challenging their authority and sometimes even encouraging the people to take up arms. Jesus knows all this, so on the other hand, if they can get Jesus to deny that he's the Messiah out of fear, it'll discredit him with his followers and with the people in general. They'll forget about him like last week's news.

But Jesus won't be caught that easily. He plays their own game.

He answered them, “I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?” (Luke 20:3-4)

What does John have to do with Jesus authority? If Jesus is the Messiah, isn't his authority from God? Or maybe it's even inherent in his person! But this is just what the Jewish leaders when Jesus to admit so that they can get him into trouble. And so Jesus admits it, but he does it in a way that puts them in the hot seat.

Luke put a lot of emphasis on John the Baptist in the beginning of the story. John was the one who went before Jesus to prepare the way. He was the one who declared the the Messiah was coming and with him the kingdom. He called to the people to prepare by repenting. John began by declaring that the Messiah was coming and then when Jesus began his ministry, John pointed to him: "There he is." And remember that when Jesus was baptised by John he was himself commissioned or anointed by the Father and the Holy Spirit. The voice from heaven spoke: "This is my Son" and the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. And so as the Messiah, as the great King, Jesus *does* have authority over the temple, he does have the right to rebuke the corrupt and misguided Jewish leaders, and he has the right—in fact it's part of his mission—to preach to the crowds in the temple and to teach them the truth about the Lord's kingdom.

Now, if John was just a crackpot raving out in the Jordan desert, that leaves Jesus' ministry and identity as the Messiah in question. If John was a crackpot, Jesus is probably a crackpot too. But the fact is that there have been plenty of crackpots who claimed to be the Messiah and most people quickly recognise them as crackpots. Most people can tell the difference between a madman and legitimate prophets like John or Jesus, who really has acted the part of the Messiah. It was obvious to everyone and doubly so considering that Jesus wasn't like the Messiah anyone expected, and yet the crowds still hailed him as King. People saw the Lord at work through both John and Jesus. This is precisely why the Jewish leaders are feeling so threatened. And they don't know what to say in response to Jesus. He turned their trap back on them. Luke

describes them in a huddle, trying to figure their way out of the trap.

And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it came from. (Luke 20:5-7)

If they affirm that John was a legitimate prophet they'll have to admit that Jesus is the legitimate Messiah—which for them means losing everything. They can't do that. But they can't deny he was a legitimate prophet either. Everyone knew he was and it would be near blasphemy to say otherwise—give that answer and they'll also lose everything. So instead they give this lame response, saying that they don't know. So Luke writes in verse 8:

And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

You see, these men are supposed to be the spiritual guardians of Israel. They're the ones who should be affirming a true prophet and warning the people away—even punishing—a false one. They're the ones who should know the Scriptures and who should be the first to affirm or deny the claims of someone like John or someone like Jesus. *It's their job.* But they would rather look inept than admit who Jesus is. And if they, the spiritual guardians of Israel, are going to abdicate their duty and their authority, Jesus tells them that there's no reason for him to give them an answer. The religious leaders of Israel, right here, expose themselves as frauds. They know their duty, they know who Jesus is, they know what the Lord expects of them, but they've so invested themselves in power, in wealth, in prestige, and in the world that they would rather deny the truth than let go of what they've built for themselves. *They refuse to repent.*

And this is the problem. Israel in general and as a people refuses to

repent. This is why Jesus came: Israel refuses to fulfil her mission and ministry in the world, so Jesus has come to fulfil it for her and to reconstruct a new Israel with himself at its centre so that the Lord's mission can continue. This is the point of the parable he tells in response to the priests and scribes. Look at 20:9-12.

And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out.

This is *Israel's* story and everyone listening to Jesus would have understood that. In the beginning the Lord had planted a garden, but humanity rebelled and sinned and was cast out. Eventually God called Abraham and through Abraham and his descendants he began working out a plan to cultivate and to restore the garden. The prophets described Israel as the Lord's vineyard. Isaiah wrote:

**Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his
vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst
of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield
grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
And now, O inhabitants of
Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge between me and my
vineyard.
What more was there to do for my
vineyard,**

that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield
grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briars and thorns shall
grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the LORD of
hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry! (Isaiah

5:1-7)

This was the story the people knew and Jesus retells it in his parable. In Isaiah the people themselves—the vineyard itself—is indicted for not bearing fruit and so God took away its protection and allowed enemies in to plunder it. Israel was carried off into exile. And now Jesus indicts the leaders of Israel—these priests and scribes who have built their own power and prestige on the backs of the people. The Lord left them in charge of the vineyard in his absence. He sent his servants to collect some of the fruit, but the tenants, the leaders of Israel, refused and three times sent the servants back to their master beaten and bloody.

Throughout the Old Testament the prophets were often described as the Lord’s servants. The people listening to Jesus understood what he meant. In Chapter 11:48-49 Jesus rebuked the religious leaders, saying: “Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs.” The fact that they refuse to acknowledge John the Baptist, the last of the old covenant

prophets adds even more evidence to Jesus’ case against them.

The owner of the vineyard in the parable had a contract with his tenants and the Lord had a covenant with Israel. He had laid claim to her and she had acknowledged that claim. He was her God and she was his people—whether she acknowledge it or not. And so just as the owner could not let the tenants reject his ownership, the Lord cannot let Israel reject his sovereignty over her. He is patient. Three times he let his people beat and cast out his servants. Still he refused to come in judgement. And as evidence of his patience and his mercy, Jesus says that the owner decided to send his own son—putting his flesh and blood in danger.

Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. (Luke 20:13-15a)

“I will send my beloved son.” Think back to Jesus’ baptism and to the voice of the Father speaking from heaven: “This is my beloved Son.” The Lord so desired to restore his people to covenant faithfulness that he spared not his own son, knowing that Israel would reject him just as she had rejected the prophets. Israel was called to bear the fruit of justice, not for her own benefit, but that the nations might see the blessings and grace of God in her. Instead, Israel has kept God’s blessing for herself and has rejected justice and mercy. She was supposed to reach out to the world, but has instead rejected that mission and calling, instead she seeks to drive the world away with whatever violence she can muster. This is what Jesus was getting at when he wept over Jerusalem and cried, “Would that you had known the things that make for peace.” The Lord’s patience with his covenant people only lasts so long. The people may forget the covenant, but the Lord does not and he will eventually

come in judgement. This is what Jesus is getting at in verses 15-18.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” When they heard this, they said, “Surely not!” But he looked directly at them and said, “What then is this that is written:

“The stone that the builders

rejected
has become the cornerstone’?
Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

Israel was waiting expectantly for the Lord to come in judgement on the nations, but Jesus warns that when the Lord comes he will bring judgement first on Israel and especially on her unfaithful leaders. Of course they don’t want to hear this. They know their own corruption, but they still can’t admit that they’re actually working against the Lord and his kingdom. They still insist that they’re doing the Lord’s work. They’re the rulers of the temple, after all!

And this is where Jesus brings them back to the prophecy he acted out in the temple earlier in the week as he turned over tables and drove out the merchants. The temple is coming to an end, because in Jesus the Lord is building something better—he’s building and establishing a new temple. Jesus quotes from Psalm 118:22. This is the same psalm the people were singing as they hailed Jesus riding into the city on a donkey: Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” Psalm 118 is a psalm of deliverance. The people cry out for help and the Lord saves them. The people cry out and the Lord sends his king, but he’s not the king people expected. The people expected a warrior to judge the nations. Instead Jesus comes humbly. The way to the Messiah’s throne passes through rejection. The people expected the Messiah to conquer the Romans, but instead he dies, crucified on a Roman cross. Jesus takes Israel’s punishment on himself. Forty years later thousands of Jews who took up the sword against

Rome wound up crucified on the hills surrounding Jerusalem—so many that the Josephus tells us the Romans ran out of crosses. And yet those who had found their identity in Jesus, who became part of the new Israel he was founding, escaped. Jesus had taken their humiliation on himself and given them a new way of life—a way of life that leads to peace. It's this new people, this new temple, indwelt by his Spirit that he gets at in quoting from the psalm.

I hate to mix metaphors, but Jesus did it first. We move from the image of a vineyard to one of a construction site. There are stones piled everywhere and the builders are choosing this one and that one to build the walls. Think of the building of Solomon's temple. In 1 Kings 6:7 we read that the stone was cut off-site so that not a hammer or chisel ringing could be heard on the site of the temple. The builders chose the stones carefully, pre-cut so that they would fit perfectly. But there's one stone—the shape just isn't right—and so they repeatedly reject it. Every day it gets pushed further and further toward the periphery of the construction site. It's worthless. It doesn't fit with the stonemasons' guidelines. Someone didn't cut it properly at the quarry. And yet as the walls and roof are completed the builders need one stone to cap it all off—that one stone that holds it all together. The architect had a plan. He sent instructions for each stone to the masons at the quarry. The keystone has to be here somewhere, but no one can find it. And that's when someone finally remembers that mis-cut stone waaay over there—the one rejected by the builders. And so the builders go over and sceptically measure it. And, sure enough, it fits—it's precisely the stone they need.

The builders—the people, Israel, her leaders—may reject Jesus today, but only because they've rejected the Lord's plan. They reject Jesus because they've come up with their own plan for how the temple is supposed to look. But the Lord—the architect—won't allow Jesus to be rejected forever. And this is where the word of judgement becomes important. Jesus speaks of the stone

crushing those on whom it falls. This is the same word used in the Greek version of Daniel 2. That's where we read of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay representing the kingdoms of the world. In the dream a stone not cut with hands crushed the statue to pieces and then, itself, grew into a great mountain that eventually filled the whole earth. The Lord will judge those who reject him. The stone that was rejected will crush every earthly power that opposes the people of God—in this case, even the temple and its priests.

The Jewish leaders and the important men of the temple understood this very clearly. This is why they were so angry with Jesus. Luke writes at the end of the passage:

The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. (Luke 20:19)

Brothers and sisters, by virtue of our faith, by virtue of our baptism, by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit you and I have been made part of the new temple built by Jesus. In his first epistle, St. Peter draws out the implications of Jesus being the living capstone of the temple. If he is a living stone and we are in him, then we are living stones too. He writes, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:5, 9). He writes that we who were once not a people are now a people because the Lord has poured out his mercy on us. Jesus has taken over the vineyard, he's pruned off the old dead wood of unfaithful Israel, and he has grafted us in. Why? In verse 12 Peter writes, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see

your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” That's a call to live the new life Jesus has given us, a life of redemption from sin and a life of grace and peace lived in the Spirit—a life that loudly proclaims to the world that Jesus is Lord, a life that loudly proclaims there is a new King in this world, a life that calls men and women to acknowledge him, to bow before him, to receive him in faith just as we have, that they might be prepared when he returns.

Is this what we're about? I know we think it is. But is it really? The Jewish leaders and the people of Israel worshipped in the temple. They truly believed they were serving the Lord and his kingdom, but they stood condemned by Jesus because they'd twisted and subverted the temple to their own agenda. Their light had become darkness. They failed in their mission to be a light to the world. Dear friends, let that not be true of us. Let us always be asking: Do our lives declare that Jesus is Lord? Does our common life together as a church declare that Jesus is Lord? Do we move the men and women who see us, who know us, who interact with us to give glory to God?

Let us pray: We give you thank, Father, for making us living stones and for making us a part of the temple that Jesus is building. The leaders of the Israel subverted the old temple to their own agenda and were unfaithful to your calling. Give us grace and fill us with your Spirit that Jesus might always and in every way be our Lord that we might never subvert your church to our own agendas. Help us to always keep Jesus before our eyes as he leads us and let us follow him in humility and faithfulness. Build your kingdom, Lord, and use us we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.