

6pm HC Sunday 4 October 2026

Isaiah 5:1-7, Phil 4:3b-14, Matt 21:33-end – ***Recognising ourselves in the Word of God and re-aligning ourselves to his ways***

This weekend I returned to East Yorkshire, to the village where I grew up, in the Yorkshire Wolds. I went with my sister, two years younger than me, to a school reunion for anybody who had been at the village primary school between 1963 and 1972. The people I met at the reunion I hadn't seen since I'd left primary school to go on to secondary school, in 1971. Fifty-five years ago.

There was a great deal of swapping of stories and memories. We talked about the people we'd all known and the experiences that we'd shared. Afterwards, talking about the event, my sister and I realised how the stories that we'd shared had helped the two of us to understand ourselves a little better and to see how our experiences had shaped our futures.

In our gospel reading we heard how people saw themselves in a new light as they saw how they fitted in to the story told by Jesus. The story deploys themes and imagery from the Old Testament that would have been very well known to Jesus' listeners in the Temple, because they are derived from familiar readings like our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 5:1-7. Jesus' listeners would have known that the vineyard stands for God and the vineyard for Israel.

Jesus begins with God's creativity and God's love for the world that he has created. ***The landowner[,] who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower [for it]*** cares for what he has created, and it is with love that he ensures that the vineyard is protected from wildlife and provides for it to be sustainable and secure.

Jesus' listeners would have realised that the fruit stood for righteousness of God's people; that the tenants were the nation's leaders; and that the slaves sent by God who had been so mistreated by the tenants were the prophets.

And that is why Jesus' listeners know exactly what the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants when he comes. And so they have no hesitation in

telling Jesus ***“He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”***

But it is at that point that Jesus’ telling of the parable becomes more controversial. This is the morning after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus has already been challenged by ***the chief priests and the elders of the people [who] came to him as he was teaching and said [to him] “by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”*** Instead of answering directly, Jesus responded with a question that had them tied them up in knots about how to answer.

So the Chief Priests and Pharisees are already feeling outsmarted, but it is what Jesus says next that really puts them on the spot, to the extent ***they wanted to arrest him***, something that they didn’t do only because ***they feared the crowds [who] regarded [Jesus] as a prophet***.

This is like the moment where Hercule Poirot has gathered everybody into the library, in order to unfold exactly how the murder was committed. The moment when Peter Falk, as Lieutenant Columbo in his shabby mac, turns back to the villain and utters those fateful words *“Oh, just one more thing”*. And with those words, you always knew that the villain has been skewered.

The bombshell that Jesus drops is that ***the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the stone that ... will crush anyone on whom it falls ... and will [leave] broken to pieces [anyone] who falls on [it]***.

Jesus has just lobbed a grenade into the conversation, because Jesus’ listeners know exactly which stone this is. They know that this is a reference to Daniel chapter 2, and to Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. This is the dream about the stone that smashed the statue which had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay. Jesus’ listeners would remember how Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that the stone that struck the statue represented the destruction of every Empire, through the coming of the Messiah, when ***the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed [which]***

shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end [because his kingdom] shall stand forever.

Jesus' listeners would also have recognised that Jesus was quoting from Psalm 118:23, with ***this is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.***

And with these two references to Scripture, Jesus' listeners would realise exactly what Jesus was telling them: that the leaders who are meant to be looking after Israel will be brought down by God himself, and that God is working his purpose out by bringing them down. And they would understand that the one who will bring them down is the Messiah, the Son of God himself. It is a connection that is amplified by the wordplay between the *Son* and the *Stone*, which works just as well in Hebrew with *ben* for Son and *eben* for Stone.

Have you ever had the experience of reading the Bible and recognising yourself in what you are reading?

Or of listening to the Bible being read in church, and having the Holy Spirit bring home to you how the Word of God is directly applicable to you?

This is the experience that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was writing about when they wrote, in chapter 4, ***The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.***

This was the experience the Chief Priests and the Pharisees had, when they heard Jesus' parables, and ***realised that he was speaking about them.***

Whenever we suddenly recognise ourselves in the Word of God, we have a choice about how we respond.

We can reject what the Holy Spirit is showing us about how we stand in relation to God, and we can choose to turn away from the path in which he is trying to lead us.

Or we can embrace what the Holy Spirit is showing us, however uncomfortable that might be at first, and we can choose to turn to God.

We can turn to him in prayer, with or without words, and we can invite him to soften our hearts and can ask him to help us to re-align ourselves to him and to his ways.

The Sanhedrin – the Council of priests and the Pharisees – included Joseph of Arimathea, who would go to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus and lay it in his own new tomb. And Nicodemus, who brought myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds, to wrap Jesus' body with the spices in linen cloths. These were men who responded to what they heard from Jesus by turning to Jesus.

Stories have the power to reveal and enlighten; to bring home to us what we might not otherwise have understood; and to show us the way forward.

When the Holy Spirit brings home the word of God to us, let's be ready to recognise ourselves in what we see and hear, and let's be ready to respond to God.