

# Year A

## Matthew 21:33-46

Do you know what an allegory is? Historian Henry M Littlefield's essay on Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published in 1964. In this reading – snappily entitled a 'parable on Populism' – the Yellow Brick Road represents the gold standard, and the Wicked Witch of the East stands for industrialists and bankers on the US east coast who control the people (the Munchkins). In his essay, Littlefield wrote, "The Wizard of Oz has neither the mature

religious appeal of a Pilgrim's Progress, nor the philosophic depth of a Candide... Yet the original Oz book conceals an unsuspected depth." The rusted Tin Man, stuck in the same position for a year before Dorothy oils his joints, has parallels with US industry after the depression of 1893; the Scarecrow reflects the Kansas farmer as viewed by outsiders, needing a brain to replace the straw in his head; the Cowardly Lion is William Jennings Bryan, who campaigned to be US president at the turn of the 20th Century and advocated a standard of both silver and gold to replace the gold standard

(in Baum's book, Dorothy's slippers are silver, not ruby). Littlefield sets his reading against the backdrop of the late 19th Century debate over US monetary policy; in subsequent interpretations, the Emerald City symbolises 'greenback' paper money that has no real value, instead obtaining its value from a shared illusion.

While scholars have questioned whether Baum ever intended his story to be satire, historians like Quentin Taylor still find enough parallels to argue that the book is a deliberate work of political symbolism. According to Taylor, "Quite simply,

Oz operates on two levels, one literal and puerile, the other symbolic and political.”<sup>1</sup>

The issue of allegory is very important as we seek to understand Jesus’ challenge in our Gospel text today. The story is introduced as another parable and that’s what it is but not all Jesus’ parables were intended as allegories like this one. So what makes it an allegory? Well, just like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* example that I began with, an allegory leads us to ask the question of ourselves, ‘what do these characters and places stand for?’ In a common parable the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/story/20140819-the-wizard-of-oz-hidden-meanings>

characters and places cannot always be identified and any attempt to do so may distort the purpose of the story. In an allegory it is critical to get the identification pinned down to gain understanding. So here in this allegorical text we have God as the landowner, the land of Israel is the vineyard, the members of the Jewish religious establishment are the tenant farmers, the prophets of the Old Testament are the representatives of God who came to collect what was due and Jesus is the son who was killed and the church is the group invited to work in the vineyard at the end of the

parable. None of that is particularly controversial. In fact the sureness of these identifications help us to feel the force of Jesus' teaching. Allegory is particularly effective at pinning people down, in order that wriggle room is eliminated and the bare facts are faced. It digs down through the layers of denial to the level of recognition.

The people of Israel and the Temple itself were identified in the Old Testament scriptures as the vine or the vineyard as we have heard in the reading from Isaiah this morning. But please note that Jesus' criticism is not directed towards the vineyard

itself but to the tenant of the vineyard, those who have been given responsibility, the Jewish leaders. This is not about the Jewish religion being superseded by the church but about the leaders being judged about their stewardship of God's gift.

The story begins with the departure of the landowner. He created a beautiful place, well fit for purpose and then he left. We have an absentee landlord. No comment is made about where he has gone or the merits or not of such a decision. Instead it is very clear that the tenants have been given an enormous responsibility. Will they be able to

cope? If they had been asked that question directly I'm sure they would have replied in the affirmative. Just look at the magnificent state of our glorious Temple. All is well with the house of Israel. If there is a problem it doesn't rest with us but instead with those malcontents that we are trying to keep in order. The enormous stewardship responsibility that they had been given had been changed into a state protection issue. As long as things continue they way they are now we'll be just fine. All Christian leaders are liable to fall under the same judgement as the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day.



When clergy think that they own the church then we have a problem. I do think there are clergy who believe that, just as there are a good number who emphatically do not. Remember the wheat and the tares entangled and one cannot be pulled out without taking the other with it? Well, here we have another example of that. But such was the power of Jesus' allegory that the leaders knew that Jesus was speaking about them. There was no doubt about it as the allegory penetrated the upper layers to get right down to the sensitive conscience. The landowner has been away an awfully long

time. So long that people have forgotten their place and some have a higher view of themselves than what is merited. The prophets arrived to challenge them and were dealt with. The owner's son arrived and surely here was the wake-up moment. But no, he was disposed of too. So Jesus asked his listeners, the Jewish leaders, a question. What should the landowner do with those murderous tenants? Well, of course, he should mete out justice and put them to a violent death. It's only fair after all, isn't it? But note that Jesus did not back up the Jewish leaders' assertion! Instead he quoted

from Psalm 118, the praise Psalm that celebrates Israel's deliverance from Egypt. There is no doubt that Jesus believed that he was the cornerstone and so the resolution of the story would rest on himself and not on what would be meted out to the tenants. In our world people look for vengeance and so often that desire masquerades behind a call for justice. 'It's only right they get their just deserts', we say. But Jesus said, the rejected stone has become the cornerstone and it's the encounter with him that will produce the ultimate outcome. He is not harsh; he is more than fair. He brings God's restoration.

Frederick Buechner has written of Jesus; “the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully”.<sup>2</sup> I think it will come as a genuine shock to most people that God is not about vengeful justice but instead about gentle restoration. Yes, there are consequences to ultimate rebellion. There is the possibility of being wrecked on the rock of the cornerstone, of being thrown out of the vineyard, but there is also a strong sense that this becomes a personal choice. Do you really want to reject the Son? If you

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick 1973 *Wishful Thinking* New York: Harper & Row

do, then may it be on your head. But if not, then welcome back.

The story is told of pioneers who were making their way across one of the central states of America to a distant place that had been opened up for homesteading. They traveled in covered wagons drawn by oxen, and progress was necessarily slow. One day they were horrified to note a long line of smoke in the west, stretching for miles across the prairie, and soon it was evident that the dried grass was burning fiercely and coming toward them rapidly. They had crossed a river the day before but it would be

impossible to go back to that river before the flames would be upon them. One man only seemed to have understanding as to what could be done. He gave the command to set fire to the grass behind them. Then when a space was burned over, the whole company moved back upon it.

As the flames roared on toward them from the west, a little girl cried out in terror, "Are you sure we shall not all be burned up?" The leader replied, "My child, the flames cannot reach us here, for we are standing where the fire has been!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ironside H.A. 1945 *Illustrations of Bible Truth* Chicago: Moody Press pp. 34-35.

The Son has been taken and has been cruelly murdered. It appears that the tenants have got away with it and like a relentless wave of fire are closing in. But the place the Son has died has become the place of refuge for the fire cannot burn there anymore.

The Jewish leaders were confronted with their rebellion and were given an opportunity to receive forgiveness and restoration. Today that offers extends to all. We would be fools to reject it.