

# *PREGO EXTRA*

Background notes  
for the Gospels of  
October 2011  
Year A



**27th Sunday in Ordinary time**  
**Matthew 21: 33-43**  
**The parable of the wicked tenants**

This is the third parable involving a vineyard (see also Matthew 20:1-16 — and comments for 25th Sunday— and 21: 28-33).

Jesus, who is now in Jerusalem is teaching in the Temple after driving out sellers and money changers (Matthew 21: 12-16). The tension between Jesus and the Pharisees is growing. He tells the chief priests and elders this story in answer to their question: "What authority have you for acting like this?..."

**The vineyard, the winepress and the tower**

These details echo those of the Prophet Isaiah (see 1st Reading). We can see in the vineyard a symbolic



representation of the Kingdom of God. In those days, the winepress was a large area, normally covered by mosaics where the grapes were laid and crushed by the feet of the workers to extract the juice.

The tower provided shelter for the family of the overseer and was used as a look out to protect the vineyard from thieves and marauders.



**The main protagonists**

For Matthew's audience, the story could be understood on two levels; it was reflecting a reality they knew only too well: the discontent expressed by tenants working for absentee landlords but they could also see that the story was symbolic. It is an allegory of the history of salvation. Each character represents a major element of the history of Israel.

- \* The landowner is God the Father.
- \* The tenants are the people of Israel and their leaders.
- \* The servants are the Old Testament Prophets
- \* The owner's son whom the tenants kill is Jesus.
- \* Although nothing specific allows us to identify Jesus as the Son, there is no other logical explanation.

**This is the heir...Let us kill him**

The tenants wrongly assume that the owner has died. They knew that if a landowner died without an heir, his land would pass to the first claimant. By killing the heir, they become landowners.



**They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him**

This is possibly an allusion to the way Jesus was put to death outside the city walls in Jerusalem.

**What will the owner do to those tenants?**

Jesus' question leads the Jews to pronounce their own condemnation.

**The Church in Matthew's time**

Matthew is writing for Jews who are realising that their community of believers, the Church, is changing. More and more Gentiles are joining their ranks. This parable is helping them to understand why this is.

**A people who will produce its fruit**

The responsibility for running the vineyard — the Kingdom of God — no longer rests with a few leaders — the tenants — but with a whole new "people", a mixed community of convert Jews and convert Gentiles who form the early Christian Church in the 1st century AD.

**28th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Matthew 22:1-14**  
**The parable of the wedding banquet**

Jesus uses this parable about the Kingdom of heaven in reply to those questioning his authority. Once again his audience is made up of chief priests and elders, the very people who would shortly be arresting him. This particular parable has very many parallels with Luke's story of the Great Dinner (Luke 14: 16-24) but it shows evidence of comprehensive rewriting.

**A King gives a great wedding banquet for his son**

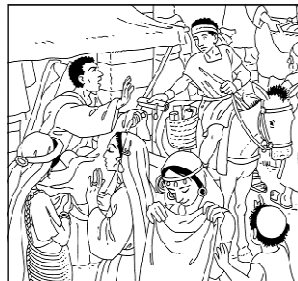
Matthew's listeners were familiar with the image of a banquet representing God's relationship with Israel (see 1st reading)

**The guests would not come to the banquet**

It was a Middle Eastern custom to send 2 invitations to give people plenty of warning, especially for those who had to come from a great distance.

Wedding feasts would last for weeks and were a good way of showing one's power and wealth.

In fact, preparations took a long time as roads were sometimes needed to be built for important guests (cf John the Baptist: "Prepare a way for the Lord")



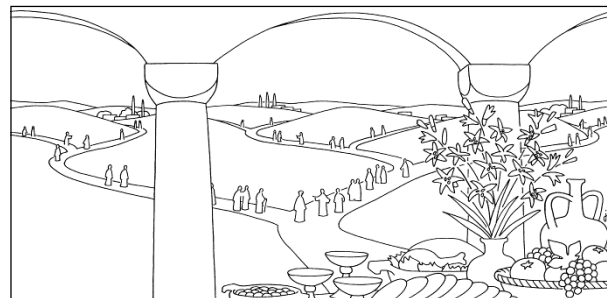
In a society where honour and shame were all important, to refuse the King's invitation was a real act of rebellion. The violence towards the servants would be tantamount to high treason especially at a time when there was no social mobility, and when 5% of the population owned 95% of the country's wealth.

**The King was enraged**

the burning of the city Matthew is probably a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem which occurred some 10-15 years before he wrote his Gospel.

**Invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet...both good and bad**

It is possible to see in this parable a symbol of God (the King) inviting his people (the guests). The original guests



(Israel) do not accept his call and newcomers (Gentiles), respond to his invitation. As with any group of people, they are not all virtuous in

equal measure. Matthew is preparing his audience to the shape of the new 1st century Church.

**The King noticed a man who was not wearing a wedding robe**

This element of the story does not figure in Luke's account of the Great Dinner.

Some scholars believe that it is a further affront to the King who would have given wedding clothes to his guests.

Others point out that the custom was simply to wear a freshly washed white garment.

At all events, the point made here is that if you accept the invitation to the banquet, that is, if you become a disciple, then your life must change. It is not enough to join in to "enjoy the food". A wholehearted response is needed.

Putting on a new garment as a sign of repentance and conversion is a familiar image in the writings of St Paul (Ephesians 4:22-24 for example)

**The outer darkness...weeping and gnashing of teeth**

This Aramaic expression which is a favourite of Matthew's (Mt 8:12 and 13:42,50) moves the focus from an image of the 1st century church to the final banquet at the end of time.

## 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Matthew 22: 15-21

#### **"Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar"**

Today and for the next few Sundays we read stories of conflict between Jesus and Jewish religious and civil leaders. We are no longer dealing with parables but with a real life situation.

The Pharisees have been the target of Jesus' previous teachings and they are keen to keep to the truce they have reached with Rome which allows them to practise their religion freely.

They seek unlikely allies in the Herodians to try and entrap Jesus.

#### **The Herodians**

As their name implies, they are supporters of the dynasty of Herod, the puppet kings Rome has appointed to rule Galilee. They are absolutely loyal to Rome.

#### **Flattery: "You are not afraid of anyone".**

We can see here a clear contrast with the Pharisees whom Matthew tells us "fear the crowds" (Mt 21:46). They let other people's opinions determine their actions.

#### **The trap: "Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"**

This is a no-win question. If Jesus says yes, he loses popular support; if he says no, he gives the Pharisees grounds to have him arrested as a revolutionary.

#### **The taxes**

Since the year 6 AD a census tax has been collected. It is paid by men and women between the ages of 14 and 65. Paying one's taxes was a kind of tribute to Rome.

#### **One denarius**

This is the Roman currency, worth about a day's wages. Striking your own money is a sign of sovereignty over a people and the Romans attached great importance to this symbol. Other currencies were in circulation at the time, but only with Roman permission.

One side of the coin featured the head of the emperor with the mention "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus", the other side carried the mention "great high priest" (Maximus Pontifex)



To observant Jews, this was an affront to their monotheistic beliefs. There can only be one God. In any case, Pharisees did not want to have a pictorial representation of God. As Judaism spread throughout the known world, not to have an image of God was a help to universality.

Moreover, they remembered that we are all made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27).

Denarii were not allowed in the Temple, that is why there were exchange tables at the entrance. This may explain why Jesus has to ask for a denarius coin.

So paying taxes with Roman coins raises political and religious issues.

#### **"Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God"**

Jesus defuses the debate by this answer. There is no doubt that the coins belong to Caesar: his face is on them, but then what belongs to God? The Jews will have been familiar with phrases like :

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)

Over the years the disciples came to understand the necessity and the rationale of dealing with civil authorities and with God (Romans 13:1-7 and 1Peter 2:13-17), yet they also remembered that "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).

## 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Matthew 22:34-40

#### The greatest commandment

This passage occurs after Jesus had a discussion with the Sadducees about the Resurrection (Mt 22:23-33). This is the fourth story where Jesus clashes with the Pharisees and religious authorities who are looking for a way of discrediting him and having him arrested.

#### Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?

At first sight the question appears innocuous. This is the sort of debate rabbis would often have between them. Pharisees sought to follow the Law to the letter, often taking it to absurd extremes.

In the first five chapters of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, there are 613 laws, 248 are positive (i.e. you must do this) and 365 are negative (i.e. you must not do that). For Pharisees not every law had the same importance depending on the subject matter, so knowing which was the greatest would be of particular interest to them.



#### Jesus' answer

He uses two different sections of the Pentateuch and links them. Never before, in any rabbinical writings had these 2 phrases been used together and given the same prominence. It is a very new approach.

#### You shall love the Lord your God...

This phrase comes from the book of Deuteronomy (6:5) and is part of "Shema Yisrael", the morning and evening prayer every Jew says daily to this day. For more than two millennia it has defined the Jewish faith.

The wording of the command is very personal: "all YOUR heart, all your soul, all your mind" and is all-encompassing. It stresses our monotheistic belief that there is only one God.

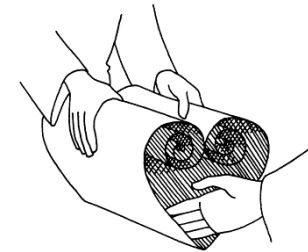
#### You must love your neighbour as yourself

This is from the book of Leviticus (19:18).

In first century Mediterranean culture, the word love does not mean so much sentimental affection as total commitment or attachment to a person or a group. Society then was group oriented—family, kin, village, region etc.

These groups provided a person with a sense of who they were. Approval or disapproval of the group acted as an external yardstick by which to judge one's actions.

So to love one's neighbour is to be as attached to the people in your area as to one's own family.



#### On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets

The Law and the Prophets constitute the whole of the Old Testament.

Matthew had already mentioned this point in his account of the Sermon on the Mount (7:12)

We have another example here of Matthew showing that Jesus has come not to criticise the Law but to uphold and fulfil it, making sure it is understood and observed properly.

