

**Sermon for Morning Prayer**  
**Passion Sunday**  
**(The Fifth Sunday in Lent)**

**Lessons:** <sup>i</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy. <sup>ii</sup>

“The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb [HOAR-ebb] in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke. <sup>iii</sup>

“... Then began he to speak to the people this parable; A certain man planted a vineyard, and let it forth to husbandmen, and went into a far country for a long time. And at the season he sent a servant to the husbandmen, that they should give him of the fruit of the vineyard: but the husbandmen beat him, and sent him away empty. And again he sent another servant: and they beat him also, and entreated him shamefully, and sent him away empty. And again he sent a third: and they wounded him also, and cast him out. Then said the lord of the vineyard, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son: it may be they will reverence him when they see

him. But when the husbandmen saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, This is the heir: come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours. So they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them? He shall come and destroy these husbandmen, and shall give the vineyard to others. And when they heard it, they said, God forbid. And he beheld them, and said, What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: ““What then is this that is written? “The very stone which the builders rejected / has become the head of the corner”? Every one who falls on that stone will be broken in pieces; but when it falls on anyone it will crush him.””<sup>iv</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

**Development:**

To understand how Our Lord’s listeners would have understood today’s Gospel passage, it is helpful to go back and review the opening verses of the fifth chapter of Isaiah:

“Let me sing for my beloved  
a love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He digged 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, I pray you, 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 briers 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, a cry!”<sup>v</sup>

Every Jew familiar with his Bible would have recognized this song, with its image of the vineyard as Israel. He would likewise have recognized that the prophet, in the character of the singer, calls on Judah to judge itself for its own shortcomings, much as the prophet Nathan called upon King David to judge himself<sup>vi</sup> for his transgressions against Uriah the Hittite.

Here, however, Our Lord has taken that familiar image from Isaiah and has given it a new twist: now it is not the vineyard that is at fault for growing grapes different from those its owner planted, it is the sharecropper tenants of the vineyard who are growing the expected grapes but who are abusing the owner by withholding from him his share of the crop, which is the rent they owed him.<sup>vii</sup> In

doing so, they are staking a claim to occupy this land not as tenants, who thereby acknowledge the landlord's claim of title, but as owners in their own right.

Having made that slight adjustment to the background facts in this otherwise familiar story, Jesus goes on to make an explicit connection between the tenants who are stealing their landlord's property, that is, the nation of Israel which is ignoring the direction God is giving it, and what that direction is, namely His sending to the Israelites His Anointed One, Who is Christ Himself.

Lest any who later heard of Our Lord's parable might fail to make this connection, St. Luke's account makes it explicit by the landlord's description of the One Who is to be sent: "I will send my *beloved* son...."<sup>viii</sup> Every later Christian should recognize that epithet "beloved" indicates the Son of God, that is, Jesus Himself. So, for example, it is used in the accounts of Jesus' baptism: "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."<sup>ix</sup>

So how will God the Father deal with those who sought to steal His estate and, in furtherance of their nefarious design, murdered His Son? That Son has already given us the answer, couched in the form of a metaphor drawn from Psalm 118, which is a song of thanksgiving that, although the Lord has chastened His people, he has not abandoned them to their enemies but, instead, has finally preserved and saved them:

"I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the LORD.  
The LORD has chastened me sorely,  
but he has not given me over to death.

"Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the LORD.

"This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

"I thank thee that thou hast answered me  
and hast become my salvation.

**The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the head of the corner.**

This is the LORD'S doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day which the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD!  
O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success!”<sup>x</sup>

The metaphor has moved from viticulture to architecture. When building with undressed stone, it is critical to strengthen a wall at its corners, which, with their changes in the direction of thrusts, form one of its weakest points. So a good builder is careful to select large and relatively even stones to tie these critical joints together.

Within the structure of such a corner, the very top course of stone is particularly important because it ties the two wings together just at the point where the weight of the roof pushes them apart. So the headstone or capstone of the corner is a vital component and a builder would be especially careful to select a suitable stone for this position.

That is as far as the original Psalm's image goes: a stone which was originally rejected – the *type* or Scriptural precursor of the Son of God – has nevertheless become the headstone of the corner – the *type* of the Redeemer who conquered sin and death. But Our Lord Himself, the antitype to the Psalmist's figure of speech, picks up and uses that *type* and, in so doing, carries that image a step farther.

He points out that these headstones present passive hazards just because of their size and weight. First, someone who walks carelessly about a building site may trip and stumble over a stone that has not yet been placed but that is large enough to serve as the headstone of a corner; thus the careless one will injure himself. Then, once a stone is placed at the top of the wall's corner, unless that wall maintains its structural integrity, the stone will fall and, in doing so, will crush anyone who is so careless as to be walking beneath it at the time.

### **Conclusion:**

The message for Passiontide should be clear to all. Our Lord was rejected by the Jewish leaders and the Jerusalem mob and so was cast away. Despite their derision and injustice, however, He has been exalted and now sits at the right hand

of God the Father, in judgement over all. So the rejected stone has become the capstone of the corner.

And what judgement will He mete out to those who used him so derisively and unjustly? Those who have the opportunity to accept Him but instead reject Him can expect the same treatment as can the land thieves and murderers in the vineyard: the Lord will come and punish them appropriately. And what punishment is appropriate for murder? As Jesus' hearers understood it, only death can adequately express the community's denunciation of the sin of murder.

Therefore the Christian's choice is clear. On the one hand, we can accept the Lord, acknowledge His sovereignty by paying Him His rent – which is the tithe – and claim the benefits of His sacrifice, which are forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life. On the other hand, we can reject the Lord, claim His universe for our own, attempt to make our own way to paradise, and, because of our incurably sinful natures, fail miserably in the attempt. If we make that choice, we may expect either to stumble over the stone that should have secured the structure of our salvation or to be crushed by it as it falls.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>xi</sup>  
March 21, 2010.

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<sup>i</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

<sup>ii</sup> *Deuteronomy 18: 15-22 (KJV).*

<sup>iii</sup> *St. Luke 20: 9-18 (KJV). Cf. St. Matthew 21: 28-42, St. Mark 12: 1-12.*

<sup>iv</sup> *St. Luke 20: 17-18 (RSV).*

<sup>v</sup> *Isaiah 5: 1-7 (RSV).*

<sup>vi</sup> *II Samuel 12: 1-12.*

<sup>vii</sup> *It should not be overlooked that this point also applies to those who withhold from God the tithe they owe to Him as the overlord of all creation.*

<sup>viii</sup> *St. Luke 20: 13a (RSV) (emphasis supplied).*

<sup>ix</sup> *St. Luke 3: 22b (RSV). Cf. St. Matthew 3: 17b, St. Mark 1: 11b.*

<sup>x</sup> *Psalm 118: 17-25 (RSV) (emphasis supplied).*

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