

**March 30<sup>th</sup> 2026**

**7.30pm Compline at All Saints Oakham**

*Matthew 21.23-46*

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

We continue our journey through Holy Week as set out by Matthew. Our reading tonight follows on directly from the events of Palm Sunday – Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, and his upending of the money changers tables in the temple – and continues his disputes with the Jerusalem religious authorities. A word of caution however about the timing of these events. At this point in Matthew’s gospel the writer tends to arrange things thematically, rather than chronologically, with similar events put together and we see something of that in today’s reading. So we can’t be absolutely sure when the events in today’s reading occurred within Holy Week – and indeed the same is true for the readings tomorrow and Wednesday, before the gospel returns to a chronological narrative on Maundy Thursday.

That being said, the events described in today’s reading fit well within the narrative framework. A few weeks before, Jesus and his disciples had left Jerusalem, as the religious authorities were threatening to stone him. He had been called back by his friends Martha and Mary after the death of their brother Lazarus. The disciples realised that this was an extremely dangerous thing to do and Thomas spoke what they must all have been thinking.

*Let us also go, that we may die with him*

And after the very public raising of Lazarus from the grave, events began to close in on Jesus and his followers. It was only a matter of time before an opportunity was found to arrest and execute the troublemaker. So in today’s reading we meet Jesus, who was now in a hurry to complete his task – to make it very clear to those who were wanting to get rid of him, just who he was and the nature of the judgement that awaited them. To give them one last opportunity perhaps to realise the position they were in and to repent and change course.

So the reading records three events. The first is the confrontation with a group of priests and elders about who Jesus was and what authority he had to teach and heal, that led to Jesus challenging them about the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repent and be baptised. Was this call from God or not? And they were afraid to answer because of the crowd, because they either admitted the Baptist was from God, which then exposed them as not following his teaching, or denying that he was from God – and thus exposing themselves to the crowds displeasure.

Two vineyard based parables then follow. The vineyard is a recurring Old Testament metaphor for the nation of Israel, so it would have been all too clear to his listeners what Jesus was referring to. Firstly the contrast between those who were meant to be caring for the vineyard and ignored their obligations, in other words the religious authorities, and those who were initially reluctant to answer the call to work, who changed their mind and went – the hated tax collectors and prostitutes, those beyond the pale. The second parable continues the vineyard theme. The owner of the vineyard sends his servants one by one to collect the produce that was rightly his, and they were either abused or killed by those working in the vineyard. Then he sent his son, and the workers conspired to kill him, so that they could take ownership of the vineyard. A more or less explicit warning to those in charge – you have already ignored or killed the prophets, and the next choice you have to make is what you do to God’s own son. But their plans would not work, they would be thrown out of the vineyard, and the vines given to others.

So in these exchanges, Jesus was making his final, direct challenge to the Jerusalem hierarchy. They were the custodians of God’s promises to his people, and needed to turn away from the protection of their own position – their temporal and spiritual authority, and perhaps too their material well being – and take heed of what God required of them. To act justly and to love mercy as the prophet Micah would have put it. To look after those who were in their care, rather than their own needs. A final call to repentance, before the inevitability of judgement. Jesus ends with the quote from Psalm 118 that both foreshadows his death and spells out the consequences.

*“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’*

So what are we to make of this. On the one hand, we are perhaps called to follow the example set here by Jesus. He was faced with the imminence of the crucifixion, yet seems in these readings to offer one last appeal to those who were challenging him. So a call then, that even when events and relationships seem to be spiralling out of control, to continue to show God’s concern and love in the world. For some that will involve continuing to speak out against injustice, to challenge the selfishness and status of others, even when it seems like shouting into the wind. For most thought, it will mean continuing to show acts of love and kindness to those around us, even in situations that seem hopeless.

On the other hand however, there is perhaps the rather uncomfortable fact that Jesus’ words might be directed at us as well as at the priests and pharisees. Words that challenge us about how we seek to protect our status, our power over others; about our neglect of the important aspects of our faith – our witness and our mission – and our prioritisation of outward observances. Just as Jesus’ call to the pharisees as he faced the horrors of the cross was to repentance, to turn around, to act justly and to love mercy, so might that call be for us. In Holy Week, Jesus walked the Via Dolorrosa, the way of the cross, and took the sins of the world onto himself, so that we might come to eternal life, so that we might

be healed and made whole. Perhaps we need again to heed his words to make following him in all our ways the priority in our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen