The parable we have just heard from Matthew’s gospel has one obvious meaning. It is a story told against the chief priests and the elders, the leaders of the Jewish people. The vineyard is Israel, the Lord’s chosen land; the tenants are his unfaithful people; the slaves sent to collect the harvest are the prophets whom they reject; and the landowner’s son whom they seize, throw out of the vineyard and kill, is Jesus.

The answer which the priests and elders give to Jesus’s question “what will [the owner of the vineyard] do to those tenants?” makes them condemn themselves out of their own mouths: “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.” Matthew leaves us in little doubt that those new tenants are the Gentiles, welcomed into the covenant, at the expense of the Jews, God’s people of old.

Put in such terms, I hope most Christians today feel distinctly uncomfortable with the anti-Jewish message of this parable. It doesn’t reject the Jews as a race, so it can’t be called anti-semitic; but it is anti-Judaic in its assertion that the Jewish religion has been ousted and superseded by the new Christian faith. It seems to have little to say to us, who have learned from the overwhelming witness of the rest of scripture and tradition that the gospel is good news for all people, Jew and Gentile alike. But when reading the Bible we have always to remember the environment in which its individual books were written. This parable very clearly comes to us from a context in which the fledgling Church was vastly outnumbered by traditional Jewish believers. It needed to define itself over and against the society from which it had broken away, a society dominated by the Jewish temple and synagogue. Today, of course, our situation is very different and after centuries of anti-semitism fuelled by stories such as this, we must read Jesus’s parable not in Matthew’s first century context, but in ours. So I’d like to offer you a re-reading of this parable for today, as a story about peace and conflict. Peace, which is God’s gift to us. And conflict, the besetting sin of humanity, as we constantly forget the Christian vocation of love.

The parable begins: “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country”. Notice how much the landowner has done; he may have gone away to another country, but he has taken great care in planting and ordering the vineyard. The tenants, on the other hand, have done very little – we’re told nothing about whether they have tended the vines or maintained the fence, winepress and watchtower. They seem to have little interest in the vineyard except to make money from it; they have no desire to look after and care for it, all they want is to inherit it and control it for themselves.

I said that I believe this is a parable about peace and conflict. Peace is the state in which the landowner entrusts the vineyard to the tenants. Not that he is naïve. He doesn’t believe that peace is self-evident; he takes care to erect a fence and a watchtower around his land, so that the grapes may flourish. But as soon as he
leaves and entrusts it to the care of the tenants, conflict breaks out. The tenants want to have the vineyard just for themselves, and they will stop at nothing to achieve this: seizing, beating, stoning and killing - the full terrorist repertoire is at their disposal.

This, I think, is a state of affairs familiar to most of us. The impatience of the tenants, their desire for control, is a fantasy all of us suffer from. We want to possess things, to own and not to share; and we like to believe that, if only things were entirely in our hands – ‘our’ being people like us – then all would be well. But, sadly, the history of humans who have had things entirely in their own hands is not an inspiring one. It is the history of selfishness, dictatorship and despotism: the will of the few imposed on the freedom of the many.

I suspect that the most persistent illusions of modern western life nearly all buy into this fantasy of control. On a trivial level, think of those disinfectant sprays which promise to banish all bacteria from our homes. Or, rather more seriously, the technology of modern warfare, with its spurious promises to make us immune from attack. These are both versions of the fantasy of the vineyard tenants, that they can seize a territory for themselves, then seal it off and live there in privileged isolation.

So, if this parable has a lesson for us today, it is the lesson that we are all creatures – that God made us, and not we ourselves. As created beings, we depend on others and on God; and if we don’t co-operate - with one another and with God - there will be no peace. ‘God’s gift’ is a phrase that is often used ironically – “he thinks he’s God’s gift”. But as Christians we do believe that each one of us is God’s gift – that the human nature all people have in common is given by God, and that we are all made in God’s image and likeness. Sin is the name we give to the refusal of this gift: the desire to make the world in my image, instead of looking for the image of God in myself and searching for his presence in and through all created things.

A parable about peace and conflict. To read today’s gospel like this doesn’t allow any easy optimism that peace is already overcome in Christ. It permits no illusions about the labour required in the vineyard if peace is to prevail. But it does teach very clearly that violence, invasion and control do not bring peace, a lesson that our world needs to hear, whether in Israel and Palestine, Syria and Iraq, or nearer to home.

As Christians we are called to a truer humanity: one of shared vulnerability and dependence on God. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”. That stone is Christ, who taught us that we are all children of our heavenly Creator, dependent on God for our very being. The Genesis stories tell us it was rejected by our forebears, Adam and Eve, as they lusted after the forbidden fruit of self-will. But the gift of true humanity is offered to us anew in Christ, the second Adam, who reconciles us to God and to one another, giving us strength to seek what the Jewish faith calls shalom: the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

“The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes”.

Amen.