**The text for my message this morning is taken from the gospel reading, Matthew ch. 21 vs.43  “The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits”.**

I want you to forget that you are sitting in Church on a blustery autumnal day in Cheshire, instead I want you to think about your ideal home. I expect we all can conjure up a picture in our minds eye. Perhaps it is a sandstone house with walled garden in the Cotswolds, a garden full of flowers, trees laden with fruit with only the sounds of birds disturbing the peace.

Alternatively you may be in an Italian  villa with fountains dancing in the sunlight, and brilliant white marble statues of heroes from a bygone age adorning the garden, as you gaze across the valley below into the surrounding hills.

Some may prefer an apartment near the beach, with  golden sand as far as the eye can see, and palm trees swaying gently in the breeze  as the waves lap against the shore.

Undoubtedly it is a place of tranquillity, somewhere that you have selected carefully, and then spent time preparing in exactly the way that you want. It is quite distinct, away from the hurly burly of life, you may even go so far as to think of it as Paradise.

Now imagine your reaction if you find that the person who you have let it to has not taken appropriate care of it, the paint is pealing, doors hang off their hinges, the garden is unkempt, work surfaces are dirty, in short your dream house is but a shadow of its former self. How do you feel ?

When Greta and I first lived in Bunbury, we spent 9 months redecorating a house before leaving to go to Australia. Then our agent let the property to the tenant from hell, despite stipulating no pets, one of the legs on our new kitchen table resembled a gnawing post. When I visited all our china was on the bench, with the remains of yesterday’s or was it last week’s meal ? A new carpet had been stained with cheap perfume, the skirting boards were damaged, all in all it hadn’t been cared for. Moreover our tenant had decided not to pay, and it took the best part of 6 months through the courts to evict him

It was a heartbreaking process. The owner of the vineyard was in a similar position. Recall  the care that the owner took in choosing the best position, tilling the ground to remove the stones, tending the young vines, building a wall to keep brambles, and intruders out, digging a pit for the winepress , laying it out to ensure that the wine was all collected, and finally erecting a watch tower, standing guard over his property. It was idyllic.

In fact it was just like Creation, remember the trouble that God went to ensure that everything was built according to plan. On the 6th day Genesis recalls that God stood back from all he had made, and reflected on how “good” it was. God took even more care than the vineyard owner in putting everything in its rightful place, the garden of Eden was a place where nothing  was missing, a place where God walked and communicated daily with man.

Yet almost immediately we read of how it was spoilt, initially disobedience, and then deceit, next comes jealousy and before you know what has happened our first murder. Mankind barely features on the celestial map and he is already having a negative impact.

Initially God set a limit to man’s life span, and then we read in Genesis how “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time....So the Lord said I will wipe mankind whom I have created from the face of the earth - for I am grieved that I have made them.

And the graphic images that Jesus retold in the story moved the crowd to similar feelings. They were indignant at the way that the tenants treated the owners servants, after all as tenants they possessed no long term rights, and had taken on a duty to give the owner the fruits of the harvest. Then when the Son was sent, rather than acknowledge the true debt that they owed, the tenants saw this as an opportunity to advance their claim on the property by killing him. Their motives were totally selfish without any qualms about the consequences of their actions.

Yet like many of Jesus’ parables this was a vehicle to get people to recognise their situation. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law would have realised immediately that Jesus was describing the Children of Israel, God’s chosen people.

Refer to readings describing Israel as the vineyard

Psalm 80 vs. 8 - A plea for the return of God’s favour the Psalmist reminds God that “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it and it took root, and filled the land.

Jeremiah ch 2 vs 21 “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine”

In chapter 5 Isaiah describes the way that God’s people repay him for his kindness towards them, and condemns the wild grapes of Judah. Their sins are described in vivid detail in verses 8 - 30.

- their greed for land and possessions , as a result of which they will suffer poor harvest, and it will become empty

- refusal to face God’s facts e.g. mindless religion, sophistry, occultism or escapism which causes God to depart from them.

History of God’s people in the Old Testament, is a tale of a people turning their back on God, and experiencing the wrath of God.

Not much fun being a prophet - isolated, rejected by people yet burning desire to do God’s will and to act as his messenger. Imagine what it must have been like to be

Isaiah forecasting the overthrow of Israel, the subjugation by the Assyrians and subsequently the exile into captivity in Babylon.

Or Ezekiel pointing out how useless the wood of the vine is if it stops bearing fruit

“Therefore this is  what the Sovereign Lord says As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will  I treat the people living in Jerusalem. I will set my face against them, ........I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful”

God had to speak through the prophets because the people had become self-satisfied, no longer recognised the power of God in their lives, trusted in their own strength, no role for God, religious worship was empty as the Pharisees had created a system of rules which kept people from God.

As Israel turned its back on God, despite the warnings of the prophets, and rejected their messiah, instead handing him over to be crucified, so ironically the gospel of Jesus Christ was made available to everyone. The kingdom of God was taken away from those with whom God had made a covenant, a covenant which was restricted on a national basis and given to the people of God constituted on a spiritual basis.

Yet is modern society any different ? In a world where we make out that we can control so much, we have unconsciously reduced the need for God. Religious belief has been downgraded to the level of superstition, an ancient rite practised by people who are living in a bygone age as if they were one of Hardy’s country dwellers.

Just reflect on the advances that have occurred over the past 100 years .

All but eliminated smallpox,

Infant mortality rates in England halved between 1900 - 1922 due to better hygiene.

Man has left the earth and walked on the moon

Cloned sheep

Experimenting with cryogenics

Genetic modification of crops so they are resistant to certain pests

Why do we need God ?  Surely it will be only be a matter of time until we can prolong life through careful management and immortality will no longer be a dream.

The risk is that we Christians become tainted by the idea that man is becoming infallible, our instinctive reaction to events that we do not understand or are unable to control is not to bring the situation to God in prayer.

I have been struck over the past few months by the frequency of natural disasters which have once again demonstrated man’s weakness against the forces of nature.

Hurricane Floyd off the East Coast of the United States causing devastation in the Bahamas.

A massive earthquake in Northern Turkey killing over 7,000 people, and smaller tremors in Mexico.

These are reminders that we are not in control, our life span is limited and comparatively short, in world which will ultimately pass away.

The gospel reading highlights how God can apparently walk away from his chosen people, warning about how he can act towards us.

Remember John’s warning to the Church of Laodicea - in my Bible it is described as the church in its final state of apostasy , a church which has abandoned its religious faith and principles.

Laodicea was situated on the banks of a river and stood at the junction of 3 great roads - it was a great banking and commercial centre, possessed its own medical school, and was very wealthy

- Laodiceans felt they needed nothing, and also boasted that their wealth was entirely due to their own efforts.

The Laodicean church is accused by the Angel of truth who bears a faithful witness to God “You are neither hot nor cold - lukewarm Christianity born out of complacency,  devoid of true fellowship with Christ.

They are described as “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked ..... so because you are neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth”

It a damning indictment of the state of their Christianity but at times I wonder the extent to which this could be said of parts of the modern Church. In the industrialised world is the Church a shining beacon of light to those around, are people attracted to Christ by the way that we live, our faith in God which guides us in everything that we do . Certainly there are some Churches which are well know

e.g. Holy Trinity Brompton, All Souls Langham Place, Purley Baptist Church, Millmead, Guildford to name a few where God really seems to be at work in and through his people

and I am sure we can all think of individuals where their life is guided by God, not that they are perfect, they would be the first to admit their failings, yet there is a peace and power present.

Unfortunately the fact that we can name these Churches  highlights the extent to which they are different, not the run of the norm. In other places despite the magnificence of the buildings, and the dedication of a few people, the spirit has gone.

The challenge is to be a church in revival like that at Philadelphia in Revelation, a people who kept God’s word and who by their deeds honoured his name, so much so that God promised to keep them from the hour of testing.

St. Boniface could become a church in revival, not numerically, although it would be nice to see the pews full, but spiritually. This will only occur if we re-affirm the power of God and seek his will in everything. At a personal level it requires us to humble ourselves, to remember our  natural state before God.

**Simon de Bell**