

Bramble Bush

The parable of the bramble, or the parable of the trees, is one of (perhaps *the*) first parable in the Bible. The context of the parable is the rise of Abimilech, Gideon's (illegitimate) son, who was named king of Israel after he had all of his brothers killed (Abimelech hired all the riff-raff to do so: "worthless and reckless fellows," as the NRSV puts it!)—all this after his father, Gideon, had refused to become king notwithstanding the people's desire to make him so.

The more general context is the discussion of monarchy running throughout the book of Judges. One side of the story seems to suggest that, short of strong monarchical leadership, society is doomed to failure. This would make Judges a propaganda document, basically, for David's reign later down the line—a political philosophy à la Thomas Hobbes that says, "People are inherently prone to riot, anarchy, and lawlessness. Government is there to keep those impulses in check." The last lines of Judges, after all, are "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Yeesh. The other side of the story is that *God*, as a matter of fact, is king over Israel, and the stories recorded in Judges are stories of God's people's failure to acknowledge this and to be satisfied with it. Rather than live peaceably under God's rule and the limited powers designated the 'judges,' they long for a king, someone whom they can touch and see—albeit someone earthly and fallen. And the people, as they very often do in the Hebrew Bible, eventually get what they want—to their detriment.

The parable of the trees, and the story of Abimilech, is evidence of the latter side of the Judges story. None of the trees who actually would make decent rulers (neither the olive tree, who produces rich oil; nor the fig tree who produces delicious fruit; nor the vine who produces wine and jubilation) want to be king. The only one who aspires to be king, who aspires to that absolute sort of power, is the one who is least suited to it: the bramble, who produces no such good fruit and is useless even for shade (we should read the bramble's statement, "come and take refuge in my shade," with suspicion, as if the bramble is a politician willing to promise anything and everything, even what they know they cannot provide).

Jotham, Gideon's last living son (other than Abimilech, of course), hid during Abimilech's massacre of their brothers. It's Jotham who delivers the parable from atop Mount Gerizim (which appears in other stories, such as when the people come into the land of Canaan), making Abimilech the clear candidate for the bramble character in the parable. (Abimilech, for what it's worth, does not come to a happy end. He is a terrible autocrat, massacring his own people (9.46-49, where he burns about a thousand people whom he trapped in a tower). In an ensuing battle, a woman drops a stone on his head. He begs those nearby him to kill him cleanly after suffering the initial blow, so that no one would think he had been killed by a woman. Of course, that's what we all remember him for now, precisely because he protested so.

The story, it seems to me, is about the human lust for power and domination—what St. Augustine called the *libido dominandi*. As Judges shows us, human beings crave not only to dominate others but to *be* dominated by others—to paraphrase one of my favorite philosophers, there is a fascism of the mind, something within us that causes us to love power, to love that which exploits us. Certainly history gives us obvious examples of brambles—autocrats, dictators, political Abimilechs of one sort or other. But I think the story is also about our more general love of power and our dissatisfaction and impatience with God to provide for us (as the people were impatient with God to provide a ruler after Gideon refused to become king, and so opted for Abimilech), whether the context is overtly political or no.

Which brings me to the sculpture. Part of what's fascinating to me about it is the figure in the middle. The outstretch hands evoke depictions of the crucified Christ, but the legs, suspended in motion, suggest either that the figure is entangled in the bramble and is struggling to break free, or is in the process actually of escaping the bramble, or both! It is a vivid portrayal not only of how the love of power can ensnare us—and, indeed, how it crucified our Lord—but how by the crucified power of that very same Lord, we can be set free from the lust for domination, our own and that of others. The crown of thorns is our Lord's answer to the bramble's reign.

Really stunning stuff by Fitz-Gerald. Thanks for inviting my thoughts. Let me know if I can be of any more help.