

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings deal broadly with the idea of bearing good fruit. The vineyard in Isaiah 5 is meant to give a good yield of choice grapes that would make excellent wine, but sadly, the vines produced sour grapes. The psalmist portrays Israel as the Lord's vineyard that is assaulted by enemies and comes to grief because of its infidelity. Paul offers the Christians of Philippi a recipe for wholesome living and the satisfaction of growing to maturity in their faith. The Gospel gives us Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants that use violence to deny the owner of the vineyard his harvest.

Isaiah 5:1-7 Isaiah sings of the vineyard planted by his friend in the hope of producing rich wine from choice grapes. The vines were of good quality but the yield was disappointing. Sour grapes are worthless for winemaking. These vines did not achieve their potential.

The irony here is that these lines begin like a love song, – in fact, an allegory of the love between God and Israel. The owner does everything possible to ensure that the vineyard gets the best chance to be super-productive. There is care and dedication in these preparations along with the fond expectation of great results. In contrast to such high expectation the vines only produce sour grapes. The actual Hebrew word here is *ba'eshah*, which means stinkweed. It's not as if the grapes were of poor quality – they were positively rotten.

The last verse in today's selection contains a climax expressed in powerful Hebrew wordplay that poetically draws out the contrast between expectation and outcome:

The Lord expected justice, *mishpat* but got *mispach*, bloodshed
righteousness, *tsedaqah* but got *tse'aqah*, a cry of distress

Israel is the vineyard and it has not achieved what the Lord expected. It is not fit for purpose and deserves to be left abandoned. Its failure is not due to inadequate worship but to a frightful record of social justice. Israel is being judged on the way people treat each other. Isaiah had already made this point:

Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Privilege requires accountability and authority must be governed by responsibility. Israel has benefitted from a covenant relationship with God that brought divine care and protection. The vineyard was not carefully prepared and planted just to exist. It was planted to produce fruit – and good fruit, through justice for all and honesty in all relationships.

What kind of fruit is my life producing?

Psalms 80 God's seeming absence from Israel creates a sense of agony in those who are sensitive to God's apparent lack of support for the nation. The poet uses the image of the vineyard planted by God and begs the Lord to pardon the faults of the nation and bestow the gift of enlightenment.

The Lord's absence is seen in the way Israel has had to put up with invasion and hostile enemies. There is recognition here that the nation has not always lived up to its privilege of being the Lord's vineyard. 'Come back to us,' they cry, 'and we will renew our commitment to you.'

It would seem that the prophet Isaiah has explained the reason for God's absence.

Philippians 4:6-9 This is a brilliant summary of Paul's strategy for maintaining integrity in life and growth to wholeness. He bears witness to the reality that what we repeatedly think about, value and desire gradually shapes the way we speak and behave. Jesus expressed the same conclusion when he was tackled by the scribes and Pharisees for casting out demons with the power of Satan. He made the analogy with fruit-bearing trees, saying that good trees bear good fruit while bad trees bear bad fruit. He said, *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks* (Matthew 12:34).

What occupies the mind helps form the person.

It is possible to hide attitudes for a while, but our priorities tend to come out through our words, decisions and treatment of others. Thinking negatively and repeatedly dwelling on resentment, revenge, envy, suspicion or the failure to look for the good in others can emerge in behaviour that damages relationships and inevitably ends in self-disappointment and a poor self-image. By the same token, if

we regularly cultivate gratitude, compassion and generosity our actions will show that we see the risk in passing judgment on others and can act with compassion and understanding.

Paul is encouraging us to fill our minds with good things. This means looking for the good in others, watching wholesome entertainment, good reading, uplifting conversation. What occupies the mind helps form the person.

Matthew 21:33-43 This is one of the most debated parables among scholars because it alludes so clearly to the vineyard image we saw in the first reading from Isaiah and it contains criticism of religious leadership, Christology, judgment, and the question of who will now produce the 'fruits of the kingdom.' The obvious difference between this vineyard and the one in Isaiah 5 is that this one produces good grapes. The focus here is on the tenants who refuse to give the owner what is his due.

We need to be careful to note that this is not about Israel as such. It is about religious leaders who have failed to be authentic stewards of their people. Not included in today's reading is Matthew's statement in v. 45 that the chief priests and the Pharisees realised Jesus was speaking about them and the quality of their leadership. So, the tenants in this parable are the Jewish leaders whose stewardship has been self-serving and not dedicated to the good of their people.

The servants whom the owner repeatedly sends to collect the harvest and revenue from the vineyard are the prophets of Israel who have been rejected, vilified and physically assaulted because their criticism of past leaders has upset the authorities and pricked their consciences. Finally, the owner sent his own son feeling that the tenants would surely respect the son and heir. And yet how foolish is this, given the record of the insolent tenants? And this ended in the outrageous crime of the son's murder.

The vineyard itself is not rejected, as in Isaiah's allegory.

It is at this point that we need to be aware that parables are not meant to be realistic, certainly not in every detail. The broad point of each parable is what matters. In this case, the master's reaction was to replace the murdering tenants with honest leaders who would carry out their duties with respect for the master and his wishes. The vineyard itself is not rejected, as in Isaiah's allegory. The audience believes the landowner would bring the wicked tenants to a wretched end – whatever that was meant to be.

It does not follow that the Church can automatically consider itself to be the 'good tenants'. What Jesus is saying applies to everyone who has been entrusted with gifts. What kind of use are we making with our gifts? What kind of return can I make to God for the life and benefits I have been given? Producing fruit is the emphasis Matthew gives to this parable, and that consideration involves all of us.

Jesus also warns us against passing judgment on others for the simple reason that our biases can lead us to misjudge people and situations.



If you judge people, you have no time to love them.

Mother Teresa



Graffiti from a Corporate Washroom

If you can stay calm, while all around you is chaos ... then you probably haven't completely understood the situation.

If at first you don't succeed, try management.

Never underestimate the power of very stupid people in large groups.

INDECISION is the key to FLEXIBILITY.

Rome didn't create an empire by having meetings; they did it by killing all those who opposed them.

I'd agree with you, but then we'd both be wrong

Laurie Woods