

Unfruitful vineyards and fruitful vines

Twenty-seventh Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – October 4, 2020

Readings: Isa 5:1-7; Phil 4:6-9; Mt 21:33-43

“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (Mt 21:43)

Prologue: The symbol that quite clearly ties together the first reading, the psalm and the gospel is the vineyard, which has rich connotations for the Israelites. While the first reading sings of an unfruitful vineyard, the third suggests handing over of one from the hands of wicked to worthy tenants so as to bear fruit. Jesus, the true vine (Jn 15:1) wants his coworkers to cultivate virtues and bear fruit.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading contains the ‘*song of the unfruitful vineyard*’ that was probably composed by Isaiah during the early part of his ministry. The imagery of wines and vineyards was very evocative for the Israelites, symbolizing prosperity and growth. One sees this imagery not only in today’s readings and psalm, but also in passages like Isa 1:8; 3:14; Hos 10:1, Ezek 17:6-10 and Jn 15:1-8. In this passage, what opens up as a sweet song about country life, a vineyard, vines and grapes, suddenly turns sour with the prophet allegorically equating the vineyard with Israel. God—obviously the owner of the vineyard—has done all within his power to ensure that the vineyard yields a rich harvest of finest grapes. Yet, sadly, God’s hopes are dashed and the singer-prophet cleverly introduces divine denouncement (vs. 3-4) after attracting the attention of his audience. Then, divine judgment and sentence is passed (vv.5-6): God shall allow the vineyard to return to its original wild, barren state with neither hedge nor rain. Isaiah wrote this poem sometime around 740 BC when Israel, though separated from Judah, was still in existence. But by the year 722 BC it would be destroyed by the Assyrians. The fate of Judah too would be similar with destruction and exile by the Babylonians. The final words echo divine disappointment with both, Israel and Judah, since, God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry” of distress (v.7).
2. Today’s gospel passage containing the ‘*parable of the wicked tenants*’ must be seen in tandem with last Sunday’s passage of the ‘*parable of the two sons*’ (Mt 21:28-32) and next Sunday’s ‘*parable of the wedding banquet*’ (Mt 22:1-14). These three parables form a trilogy revealing the pride, arrogance and hardheartedness of Israel’s religious leaders—mainly, its’ priests, scribes and pharisees—who would soon lose their privilege of being the ‘chosen ones’ in the kingdom of God to those whom they deemed unworthy, impure and sinful; yet, ironically, would be heirs to that same kingdom. Jesus’ parables can be categorized either as ‘window parables’ or ‘mirror parables’. The ‘window parables’ give glimpses of God, the kingdom, the divine attributes, etc.; while in the ‘mirror parables’ Jesus holds up a mirror, so to say, to the faces of his hearers so that they see themselves reflected in the parable. The origin of this parable is clearly Isa 5:1-7 above. At a basic level, one could equate the landowner with God, the vineyard with Israel, the wicked tenants with Israel’s religious leaders, the slaves with the prophets, the son with Jesus, and the murder of the son “out of the vineyard” (v.39) with Jesus’ crucifixion outside Jerusalem (see Heb 13:13-14). Moreover, given the focus of Matthew’s gospel for the Jewish

community, one could conclude that the new inheritors of the vineyard are we, Christians, and the Church. While such an interpretation is direct and attractive, it could lead us to develop a holier-than-thou attitude that Jesus constantly condemned. How else, then, can we make meaning of this parable?

3. Though the first and third readings speak of vineyard, landowner and his goodness, the key to understand the parable is Jesus' focus on *fruit-trees* and *fruitfulness*. This can be inferred from the line: The landowner will "lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the *produce* at the harvest time" (v.41). Interestingly, Jesus draws out the moral of the parable—as well as the self-condemnation of the religious leaders—from their own loud mouths! Moreover, in the last line of the gospel, Jesus once again says, "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" (v.43). Likewise, just as the landowner expects fruits from the tenants in the gospel reading, so does the landowner look for fruit in the first reading: God *expects* justice but sees bloodshed, God *expects* righteousness but hears a cry of distress! The fruitlessness that Isaiah condemns is the absence of justice and righteousness. Thus, we, Christians who may presume to be heirs of God's kingdom—having taken over the inheritance from the Jews, so to say—ought to realize that we are expected to produce fruit in our own lives. It is also important to note that many prophets have become victims of injustice and unrighteousness since they have been mouthpieces of God proclaiming the need to bear fruit in our lives and to cultivate virtues and values of God's kingdom.

Linking the Psalm and the Second Reading to the Theme:

The response to the psalm—in keeping with the theme of the vineyard—simply states: "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel." The tone is not one of condemnation but of hope in God's deliverance and restoration: "God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved" (Ps 80:7). In the second reading, Paul draws upon the ethical teachings of Stoicism exhorting Christians to cultivate: "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing and whatever is commendable" (v.8) Aren't all these virtues worth cultivating as we dwell in and draw sustenance from the true vine: Jesus (Jn 15:5)?

A Current Concern:

Turning Unfruitful Vineyards to Fruitful Ones: October 4th is traditionally celebrated as the feast of St Francis of Assisi, from whom Pope Francis took his name, and of whom he wrote: "Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace" [in *Laudato Si'*, n.10]

Fruit for Thought:

"Why has my stay here yielded no fruit?" asked a novice who was disillusioned with life in the novitiate and decided to leave it. His spiritual director replied benignly: "Could it be that you lacked the courage to shake the tree?" Inheriting the vineyard is no guarantee that it will automatically bear fruit. God does the sowing; to us is left the nurturing, pruning and harvesting.
