

Sunday 8th October 2017. EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST.YR A

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43(46)

The parable of the vineyard owner and his murderous tenants: "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruits."

Ol' Fred had been a faithful Christian and was in the hospital, near death. The family called their preacher to stand with them.

As the preacher stood next to the bed, Ol' Fred's condition appeared to deteriorate and he motioned frantically for something to write on.

The pastor lovingly handed him a pen and a piece of paper, and Ol' Fred used his last bit of energy to scribble a note, then he died.

The preacher thought it best not to look at the note at that time, so he placed it in his jacket pocket.

At the funeral, as he was finishing the message, he realised that he was wearing the same jacket that he was wearing when Ol' Fred died. He said, "You know, Ol' Fred handed me a note just before he died. I haven't looked at it, but knowing Fred, I'm sure there's a word of inspiration there for us all."

He opened the note, and read, "Hey, you're standing on my oxygen tube!"

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our God is a God who trusts his workers. Just as the landowner gave the tenants a fully equipped vineyard in which to work and produce, God creates the possibilities for work, fruitfulness and success for us too. He provides us with opportunities and resources and trusts that we will make the most of these. Our own, personal vineyards are completely unique. Do we recognise how our lives are moulded by God? Do we recognise the opportunities and resources that God has given us? Have we experienced the freedom and trust that God gives us? Have we responded responsibly or have we responded like the tenants at times?

Today's Gospel parable "updates" Isaiah's allegory of the friend's vineyard. God is the owner of the vineyard who has "leased" the property to the religious and political leaders of Israel. Many servants (prophets) were sent to the tenants, but all met the same fate. The owner finally sends his own Son, who is brutally murdered "outside" the vineyard (a prediction of his crucifixion outside the city of Jerusalem?). With this parable, Jesus places himself in the line of the rejected prophets. The owner finally comes himself and destroys the tenants and leaves the vineyard to others (the Church) who yield an abundant harvest.

This parable is intended to give hope and encouragement to Matthew's Christian community, which is scorned and persecuted by its staunchly Jewish neighbours. Fear, selfishness and bigotry can kill whatever chances we have of turning our part of God's vineyard into something productive; but, through justice, generosity and compassion, we can reap a rich and fulfilling harvest, regardless of how small or poor or insignificant our piece of the vineyard is.

Like the tenants in today's parable, we are too quick to reject whatever scares us or threatens us, whatever we don't understand, whatever challenges us and the safe little worlds we have created for ourselves. In Christ, God calls us to look beyond the "stones" of our fears and welcome Christ (in whatever guise he may appear) into this vineyard of ours, aware that he calls us to the demanding conversion of the Gospel but determined to sow and reap the blessings of God's reign.

Our God is a patient God. Just as the landowner sent several servants in multiple waves to collect his payment of produce, God also seemingly gives us chance after chance to respond to his unique call to us. Do we recognise and appreciate the patience of God? How many warnings have we disregarded? Do we fear having our task taken away from us? Do we recognise the impending judgement of God based upon our response to His call of vocation and His call to holiness?

God giving and taking away His blessings and his kingdom is not a concept unique to this text. One is reminded of the words -- to he who has, more will be given, to he who has only a little, even that will be taken away. That is, God expects from us an abundant produce if we are to be builders and residents of His kingdom. Also, in the parable of the talents we are reminded that we are to use our gifts wisely to maintain them.

Christ the Messiah comes with a new, transforming vision for our "vineyard": a vision of love rather than greed, of peace rather than hostility, of forgiveness rather than vengeance, a vision that enables us to reconcile even the ugliest and smelliest dragon among us.

Amen.

