

Lent 5, Matins

Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21

Father Christopher

'What is life to a man without wine? It has been created to make men glad.' [Sirach 31:27]

Which is your favourite parable? The parable of the good Samaritan? The lost sheep? The prodigal son, which we've been focussing on here this Lent? Or that of the mustard seed?

How about the parable of the vineyard? I thought not. This is a parable that is hard to like. And yet it opens with the same lovely scene of the planter of the vineyard tending and caring for it that we heard in Isaiah: *My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein.*

This is a bucolic image, straight out of a cross between *Gardener's World*, *A Year in Provence* and *Grand Designs*, which also happens to buy into our post-Covid idyll of escaping the town to work from home in our very own Cotswolds farmhouse. Except it somehow turns from a Utopia to an all-too dystopian vision.

It's also hard to have sympathy with any of the characters, I think. Aside from the tenants' ill-treatment of the householder's servants, what does he think he's doing, then sending his son? Surely he's being naïve at best, and reckless at worst, in thinking that they will reverence his son when they've killed the others. To add to this, this passage has frequently been understood in a supercessionist way – that is, justifying an idea that Christianity has superseded Judaism, making it unnecessary. *'The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.'* So, put bluntly, is this story redeemable? Well, it forms part of our scriptures, so we have to make something of it. And not just that: it is told by Jesus, and so it must surely be good.

But where to start? Well firstly, the householder - and I don't think it's uncontroversial to say he's intended to represent God – hopes the vineyard will produce wine, so it can't be all bad. And Jesus has of course used wine as a sign of God's bountiful, overflowing munificence before, in the first of his signs at Cana in Galilee.

Secondly, while through the prism of the often unhappy history of Christian-Jewish relations the language of *'The kingdom of God [being] taken from you'* and given to another nation does sound unmistakable; it is less so when we remember that Jesus is speaking not to the entire Jewish people, of which indeed He was one, but to the Jewish *leaders* – the Chief Priests and Pharisees. It is from them that the Jesus says the Kingdom of God will be taken. And when it comes to the attitude of the householder, in expecting things to be different with his own son, well, firstly, this is only a parable, a story which Jesus tells as an illustration. Parables only go so far.

And the primary point which the householder's - or God's - attitude is I think intended to convey, is that God's perspective is *totally* different from that of the tenants - the chief priests and Pharisees. The householder tends the vineyard carefully, expecting beautiful wine to flow as a result. Similarly, he sends his beautiful son – how could they not reverence him?

They on the other hand only want to take what value they can out of the land. Instead of seeing the householder's son, they pointedly only see the heir to his property. We however should see as the householder sees, not as the tenants see.

The fact that this parable takes so much explanation doesn't help, and we might naturally feel that we could never imagine ourselves into the position of the tenants. *We* could never imagine murdering the agents of a landlord we were renting from. And yet that is to miss the point; for this parable is really about the fruits.

The similarly well tended vineyard in Isaiah bears small, bitter, wild grapes, despite the attention given to it. And the question for us I think, particularly as we begin Holy Week today, is what fruits does our faith brings forth? '*You shall know them by their fruits.*' '*Can a good tree bring forth bad fruits?*'

The Father is constantly sending throughout this story: he sends servants, then he sends more, and then he sends His Son, when most would have given up. God similarly sends to us. He sends opportunities to us for bearing good fruit, just as if we are faithful He will work through us.

It is very easy for us to get this wrong: for us to imagine that if we are faithful we will dwell in a constant state of peace here on earth. Just as indeed we often imagine that if we are not in peace, that must somehow be down to us. Yet this parable takes us away from our myopic vision of ourselves. Instead of just seeing ourselves in the midst of our concerns, needs and desires, we see from the perspective of God, constantly sending opportunities to us to be close to Him. Instead of all being about us, it is all about Him.

Our prayer may make us feel *calm*; our faith may *reassure* us. They will not however make us immune from depression or make us uncomplicated people. The fruits of the Spirit, St Paul tells us, are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. Even the most saintly will not enjoy all of them all of the time however. And we know from the experience of Mother Theresa, St John of the Cross and many others, that even the saintliest go through times of great trial – years even. No, this faith of ours which we seek to live out, is not about us at all, or about making ourselves *feel* good, though we hope that might follow.

Our faith is instead about us drawing close to God. Or rather accepting the invitation which is always there, receiving the Good News which He constantly sends to us, if we will only look up and see it. If we respond – if we give God His due, then the fruits of the Spirit will flourish, the fruits of the Kingdom of God even, which we pray daily for the coming of: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. If we hold God's gifts too close however, as the tenants did, trying to possess what we see as ours by right, as our inheritance, to the exclusion of others, then we will yield those wild grapes of which Isaiah spoke.

Instead, this Holy Week, let us make space for God, and for others, trusting that God provides more than we could ever desire if we will only let Him. And let us simply be this week, *waiting* on Him and *worshipping* Him, and *trusting* Him to be with us, as we walk with Jesus through His agony and death, to the glory of Easter. For God giveth the growth, and of Thine own do we give Thee. Amen