

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders: "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'" So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruit."

REFLECTION 1:

SONG OF THE VINEYARD

Today's Gospel warns us, 'The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and will give it to a people that will produce its fruits'. It is a plea for us to be workers in the kingdom of God in our times and place. It rallies us to join forces in order to build God's kingdom on earth.

In Jesus' parable today (Matt: 21: 33-43) the vineyard owner stands for God, the vineyard itself, Israel; the tenants, Israel's leaders; the servants, the prophets; the son, Jesus. The parable illustrates both God's patience and God's justice. God dealt patiently with Israel's leaders. But when they refused to repent, God passed judgement on them. Jesus' parable was intended to touch the hearts of those who listened – to move them towards repentance and the experience of God's forgiveness. The parable illustrates the rejection Jesus experienced during his own life on earth and was reflected later in the suffering of the early Christian community. Unlike Judaism they were subjected to Roman oppression for their faith.

Those listening to today's parable would have been aware that the servants who were sent represented the prophets who were mistreated and even put to death for speaking God's truth to an unwilling people. Notice how Matthew refers to the manner of Jesus' death (the son in the parable) that they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him 'outside the city'. In response to Jesus' question, 'Do you never read the scriptures?' Imagine the reaction of the chief priests and elders and their extensive knowledge of the sacred texts! Jesus quotes the psalm that tells of the stone rejected by the builders that now becomes the cornerstone. Although Jesus was a stumbling block for many in Israel nevertheless he became the corner stone/foundation stone of a community of living stones who relied on him for life, solidarity and grace.

The parable also has a message for us. It tells us of God's reliance on human beings. He pays us the compliment of entrusting us with continuing his message of salvation on earth affording us chance after chance to respond to his appeal. Jesus is in fact God's final appeal, his final challenge, which we will deliver as Jesus' legacy, forgiveness, mercy and justice. Pope Francis quoting the prophet Micah summed up the heart of the Christian Gospel, 'This is what the Lord asks of you; only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

REFLECTION 2:

THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD

In biblical writing the chosen people were often portrayed as 'the vineyard of the Lord'. We have an example of this in today's first reading, Isaiah's 'Song of the Vineyard'. 'My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug the soil, cleaned it of stones and planted choice vines in it'. With all the care and cultivation he lavishes on his vineyard, the owner has great expectations of a good yield at harvest time, but all he receives for his efforts and labour are sour grapes. In his disappointment he turns the vineyard into a wasteland, taking away the hedge for grazing and knocking down the walls, and leaving it overgrown with weeds. The vineyard, Isaiah explains, 'is the House of Israel, and the men of Judah, the chosen plant'. It is clear that God is really the vinedresser, whereas the vineyard was responsible for its own devastation.

In today's Gospel (Matt: 21: 33-43), Jesus draws from 'Isaiah's Song' but he alters the central imagery. Israel is no longer the vineyard itself, but tenant farmers working for their landlord. In Jesus' time, it was common for land to be owned by absentee landlords, who would collect the rent from the tenant farmers at harvest time. The lengthy absence of the landlord, along with the harsh economic climate under Roman rule, often led to difficulties between landlord and tenant, sometimes leading to assaults on the agents sent to collect the rent.

In today's parable, the landlord sends his servants to collect what is due to him. When they are treated with brutality, the landlord sends a larger number – but they meet with the same fate. Eventually, after these disasters, the landlord sends his son, hoping his tenants will respect him. The landlord's hope is dashed, his son is thrown out of the vineyard and killed.

The chief priests and the Pharisees knew very well what Jesus was intending this parable to say to them – he was giving them a summary of salvation history. The landlord's servants stand for the prophets God has sent to Israel, only to see them treated with disrespect and violence. The son is clearly a figure of Jesus dragged out of Jerusalem to be crucified. Jesus is not just another prophet, but God's own Son. The punishment of leasing the vineyard to other tenants clearly indicates that the kingdom of God will be granted to the Gentiles (non-Jews) who will be expected to deliver the produce.

The chief priests and elders react with hostility to the parable, but they cannot lay hands on Jesus without endangering their own position. It will only be a matter of time before they devise the opportune moment. The parable has a message for us - it tells of God's trust in human beings. He pays us the compliment of entrusting us with his work. It tells of God's patience, he gave the tenants chance after chance to respond to his appeal. Jesus is God's last appeal, his final challenge. He expects that we will deliver forgiveness, mercy and justice. The parable has its own question addressed to each of us: are these the fruits we produce?