

St. Brandon's 8 Oct 2023

(Isaiah 5: 1-7); Ps 80: 9-17; Phil 3: 4b-14; Matt 21: 33-end

Giving II – the Vineyard

Prayer:

Lord, help us to hear your word to us today, that we may be changed and challenged to live for you. Amen.

Have you ever visited a vineyard? Perhaps in France, Germany or further afield, or these days even in Kent or Surrey. Each wine is specific to its place of origin, the soil, the grapes, the weather conditions, all contribute to producing a good wine.

The image of the vineyard runs throughout the Bible, as three of today's four set readings exemplify. *Please do read* the old testament passage from Isaiah 5 *when you get home- it is* a powerful prophetic picture of God's generosity and Israel's waywardness, leading to their downfall. Then in Psalm 80 we again meet the vine, this time as an image for God's people rescued from slavery in Egypt, and again God's care in tending the vine and making it flourish and bear fruit, followed by the destruction caused by people's carelessness and disobedience, and finally a cry to God to 'cherish the vine' and have mercy.

Many other scriptures, in the prophecies of Jeremiah, Hosea and Amos, the stories of Naboth, Gideon and others, concern vineyards, watch towers, winepresses and wine. An archetypal biblical image of prosperity and blessing is a family sitting under the vine they have planted and tended, enjoying its fruits and sharing them with their community. Israel was and is a remarkably fertile area where crops grow abundantly in the rich soil. Vineyards symbolise life, either lived God's way or not – fruitful and abundant, or producing only weeds and wild grapes ...

It is painful and poignant to be looking at this today in the light of the violence which has erupted once more in that very land – the hatred and fear caused by age old disputes over whose land it is, who has the right to live, work and do business, who controls the precious water which enables everything. I don't pretend to understand this, but I have ringing in my ears the final words of Bishar, our Palestinian Christian tour guide on pilgrimage there just a few months ago – *Please pray for the peace of Jerusalem.*

We do so now, for a moment, and I know Edward will also lead us in prayers for peace later in the service.

PAUSE

This is the evocative landscape into which Jesus speaks in today's gospel, to an audience acutely aware of all the Old Testament passages I've mentioned. We'll first explore the parable's original application and then see how it applies to us today and to St Brandon's. Jesus is in Jerusalem and on his way to the cross. The storm clouds are gathering and he's arousing hostility around the temple courts with the religious leaders of the day. Today's story is clear and provocative: everyone knows the vineyard owner is God and the tenants are the people of Israel, who were given the land for their inheritance, under God. So far so good. The chief priests and Pharisees might even nod sagely as Jesus tells of the owner's slaves being rejected when they come to collect the owner's produce at harvest time, since prophets were rejected throughout Israel's history. Rejected, ignored, even killed- just look at John the Baptist.

But they, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, are keeping the law in immense detail, collecting temple taxes and tithes efficiently, and imposing the system of religious sacrifices with ruthless energy, all to ensure that the owner, God, gets his due, as it were.

They've also negotiated with the Romans to ensure the system can keep going efficiently, leading to a mutually beneficial collaboration between the local religious leaders and the current occupying empire. They are not expecting Jesus' story to unfold as it does.

Finally, says Jesus, the owner sent his son to them, saying 'they will respect my son'. And the tenants kill the son, because they're so full of their own power and status that they think they will then inherit the vineyard.

Oh, the arrogance of us humans, **grasping and greedy**, when we should be **grateful and generous**.

Nevertheless, when Jesus asks his listeners what should happen to the tenants, they rightly answer they'll be thrown out and other tenants appointed.

And Jesus isn't finished yet. Knowing his audience, he quotes Psalm 118 – the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and it is marvellous in our eyes.

There's a clever play on words here- which works in Hebrew and in English. Just as in English

the letters of 'son' can be expanded to make 'stone', so in Hebrew the word 'ben'- son, just needs one letter added to become 'eben', stone. It makes the saying all the more powerful and memorable.

You'll see, Jesus says, you kill the son and the *son* will be raised to become the key *stone* of the new temple of the people of God.

Out of rejection comes resurrection, and all these religious systems and edifices will be swept away when the new kingdom of God is established by the Son.

The parable hits home, the opposition mounts and very soon the son is indeed killed, and the new kingdom of God is established, to be the inheritance of all those who bear fruit- the fruit of the Spirit of God.

A parable for Jesus' day and for ours too.

We who serve in God's vineyard here in Brancepeth, with its rich soil and spacious planting, will we bear fruit too, fruit that is God's, from God and for God? We need to heed the warnings in the parable..

Firstly, that stone which stands for Christ. The stone which was and is rejected, but whom we believe to be the Son of God, our Saviour, whose death and resurrection have redeemed the world and brought us forgiveness and new life. We who believe Jesus is Lord of all, must live this out daily, so our lives proclaim the good news that God loved the world so much that he sent his son...

Secondly, lets recognise that if we're not *grateful* to God in every area of our lives, we risk being *grasping* – thinking we somehow deserve what we have, placing our own wants above the needs of others and our own importance above our worship of God, grasping at status rather than grateful in our service. We follow Christ, our servant King, and so *like Paul in today's epistle*, for us the way of service is the path to glory.

Let me give you just one example: Sometimes I'm in church midweek when church members slip in to clean the floors, the kitchen, the loos... joyfully and cheerfully serving God. Every 'unseen' act of service like this is immensely precious and seen by God: thank you. Beyond this building, wherever you are, every prayer and act of service matters, in our homes, workplaces, families, neighbourhoods, volunteer roles. It is all the fruit of God's vineyard, and Jesus says, whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.

Finally, it is sadly true that if we're not *generous* we become *greedy* – keeping for ourselves what is rightly God's, and given by God not only for our own needs but for the benefit of others, whether that's across the diocese, so every part of Durham can have an active parish church, or locally to support our care for the elderly, or Messy Church with families, or maintenance bills to keep the church open daily as a prayerful space for all... Giving first, and intentionally, not as an afterthought, is a helpful way to embed generosity in our lives, and God will then free us from *greed*.

Just as the wine of the Loire differs from that of the Rhine valley, so God's vineyard here will produce fruit and wine distinctive to this place, different from Teesside or the Tyne valley. We're not to make comparisons or mimic others, but to be faithful to what God wants to grow among us – whether it's the rich merlot of prayer and care or the champagne of community celebrations ...

Our responsibility, as tenants of the vineyard in this generation, is to care for it and make it fruitful, to the best of our ability, as we follow where the Spirit leads us and offer the gifts God has given, gifts of time and money, people and prayer.

For God planted this vineyard long ago, tended, nurtured and protected it, and all we steward today is his alone. Everything we value about our church and our shared life is given to us by God and we acknowledge gratitude to him by living grateful, generous lives.