

Sunday 2nd October

Isaiah 5.1-7; Philippians 3.4b-14; Matthew 21.33-46

Our readings today are about two vineyards, with Paul's outpourings to the Philippians sandwiched in between. But I have in mind a fourth text which, because this is a Eucharist, 'the supper of the Lord', seems to me to overshadow the appointed readings and guide our interpretation of them. This is in the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus speaks of himself as the true vine and of the disciples as the branches. As any New Testament scholar will tell you the point of the metaphor of the vine and its branches is that when you look at a vine you can't tell which is which. The vine is the branches and the branches are the vine. So Jesus calls us to see ourselves as an organic part of his life, drawing our life from his and letting our own lives bear fruit for the whole. This is why we are here, to draw on his life outpoured for us, and to offer our lives a living sacrifice. Vine, branch, communion, one life.

But the vine has a history. It is Israel's history and it is our history. The Hebrew scriptures often allude to Israel as a vine planted by God and this theme is played over in the reading from Isaiah as the lament of a disappointed lover: 'Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard'. The vineyard which has been chosen for its location, dug over, cleared, planted with the kind of big red vines whose successors perhaps still contribute to the rather wonderful spicy red produced in the vineyards of the Golan Heights, this vineyard is protected by a watch tower and a huge vat is constructed for the grapes to be pressed. But when the harvest comes it is a shattering disappointment. The grapes are small and wild and sour. No good for wine, no good for anything. It is as though the vine has revealed its true nature and what follows is a sacramental desecration. Because the vineyard is a waste, it will be wasted. Because it has failed to produce it will be abandoned. The almost unbearable pathos of the song turns to a declaration of judgement. Israel has turned out to be a wild child, incapable of bearing the fruits of justice and righteousness which God had intended.

Jesus surely has Isaiah's song in mind when he preaches to the high priests and elders of the people at the beginning of the week which will end with his passion. His parable is also about a landowner who planted a vineyard and prepared and protected it. But the language here does not reflect the passionate love of Isaiah's song. It is cooler, more business like. The vineyard turns out to be a kind of buy-to-let operation with the owner taking himself off to somewhere unspecified and leasing the vineyard to tenants. There's nothing wrong with the vines this time, but the tenants are the tenants from hell, refusing to deliver the fruit or the wine, and turning the vineyard into a murder scene.

The story could not be more provocative. Jesus is speaking to the wicked tenants themselves who have treated their contract with contempt, and even now have not yet done their worst. The landowner's son is here to collect what is rightfully his, and their response will be to seize him and kill him and attempt to take the vineyard for themselves. And by doing so, by the intentions of their hearts, by their scheming plotting minds, even as they stand before the Son, they bring themselves under judgement.

Both versions of the vineyard story are full of disappointment. Listening to Isaiah's love-song brings to mind what it is like when someone we have loved and cherished and taken delight in while they were growing up becomes estranged from us. We never quite looked for a return on our love, it was never like that and yet the lack of reciprocity leaves us wounded. Jesus's parable is more business-like, more legalistic. The judgment at the end is not so much on Israel but on those who speak in Israel's name and control Israel's destiny. We know as we hear it that they will fulfil their part in the story on Good Friday, just as Jesus said they would.

This morning both versions of the story are addressed to us, and they are intended to question us, to probe our desires and intentions. Are we too, the pleasant planting of the Lord? Do we not have a vocation to bear fruit in our lives? Are we not born as one early Christian theologian put it, with the seeds of virtue in our hearts? And should we not be bringing those

seeds to maturity and harvest in lives of righteousness and compassion? And does not our baptism incorporate us into the life of the Son, are we not grafted into the vine that is Christ and his people? Yet, in spite of our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life in reality we deliver so little, the offering is so small.

The issue for us is the same as for Israel, as for those who listened to Jesus in the week of his passion. We are in denial about where we come from, in denial about our absolute dependence on God. In denial about our Christian vocation. Instead of producing the fruits of justice and faithfulness we expect to be rewarded simply for doing our own thing, perhaps taking a little quiet pride along the way in all we have managed to achieve with our gifts and our opportunities.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians speaks as one who is living the vineyard parable in his very being. He is in the eye of the storm, the representative of Israel become Apostle to the Gentiles. Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, a Pharisee, a righteous, blameless man. And yet, through his encounter with the living Christ he has come to a very different place. He has reached a strange humility which is also a liberation. So he can embrace the paradox of, 'Whatever gains I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.....' and then perhaps most movingly, this complex and difficult apostle, simply declares, 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection'. He knows where life is. The fruit cries out to the vine for its life and freedom. He has no other desire except to strain and press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Or, going back to John's Gospel, he knows that there is nowhere else to be except to be more deeply where he is, abiding, remaining, dwelling in Christ the true vine. Here is our response to the Lover's call, here is our return on the landlord's investment, that true reciprocity which is expressed to us and offered to us again and again in sacrament of Holy Communion.

So as we approach that mystery of Christ's death and resurrection let each of us press on with Paul 'to make it my own, because Christ Jesus

has made me his own'. Or in the words of the Anima Christi: 'Soul of Christ, sanctify me, body of Christ, save me, blood of Christ, flood me, water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesus, hear me; within thy wounds hide me, and suffer me never to be separated from thee'.