

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time: Caring for the Vineyard

It must be time for grapes to be harvested, because we've heard about vineyards the last three Sundays. Two weeks ago we had the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, last week the parable of the two sons who were asked to work in the vineyard and today the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard.

Today's parable flows from the first reading for this Sunday, from the first section of *Isaiah*. In the first reading a vineyard is cared for, but it does not produce fruit, so it is destroyed. In the gospel for today, it is not the vineyard that is bad, but its tenants that are bad. They kill the servants and even the son of the owner. They will be destroyed so that someone else may care for the vineyard properly.

The vineyard in this parable is the Kingdom of God. It is the Church in the broadest application of the term Church. The vineyard is cared for by wicked tenants who are concerned only with their own gain. They are willing to cheat, steal and even kill to bolster their own lives. They use the vineyard for themselves instead of caring for it.

This parable answers the question of the ancient world: if this Jesus is really the Messiah, the Christ, the Chosen One of the Hebrew people, then why is it that non-Jews, Gentiles, have flocked to him, while the Jewish people have not? The answer is that the leaders of the people had become mean spirited and even corrupt. This should be no surprise, the Lord states. Their fathers killed the prophets, and their sons would kill the Holy One. The parable gets so specific that it prophesies that the Son would be taken out of the vineyard and killed. Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, was outside the city gates of Jerusalem.

Throughout this parable Jesus makes a direct attack on the chief priests and leaders of the people. They are not concerned with caring for God's people. They are concerned with themselves. The pharisees treated everyday people like dirt. Everyday people could never be holy enough for the Pharisees. At the same time they wanted everyone to realize how holy they, the Pharisees, were. They used their position in Jewish society to build themselves up in other peoples' eyes. They were certain they were so much better than Jesus who associated with common people. The pharisees were concerned with themselves not the vineyard.

The chief priests were leaders who used their position for temporal gain. They were not spiritual. They often walked the borderline between Jewish and pagan practices. And they were excellent at milking their position for every cent they could get.

That's the background. Historical reflection on scripture is always interesting. Recognizing how this particular passage applies also to us is frightening.

We have been brought into the Kingdom, the vineyard, to produce fruit for the world. We have been called to do the work of the Father. It is a great honor. It is also a

deep responsibility. We are responsible to God to carry out the work of the Kingdom. We are responsible to feed the world the fruit of the Father's Love. Evangelization, the promoting of our faith, is a responsibility we all must embrace. I am absolutely edified by so many people I have met do their best to bring the faith to others.

The work of the Kingdom also demands that we continue the Lord's mission of reaching out to the poor, the persecuted, and all those that society places on its fringe. We reach out to the poor not just because we are humanitarians, but because we are Christians. We take seriously the promise of *Matthew 25*, "Whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you have done for me." We Catholics reach out to those whom society persecutes, those who society has decided are so different that they are not in the mainstream of society. The Catholic Church is the largest charitable organization in the world. That charity must be extended to all, not just to the destitute. The charity of the Church is fundamental to whom we are.

We have to be very careful that we don't continue the mistakes of the chief priests. The chief priests were only concerned about monetary gain. We have seen this repeated in history, including in our modern times. Religion is big business and a great seller. Many people use their faith for business gains. Some professional people see membership in a Church as an important aspect in building up credibility in their profession. Of course, we have also come upon TV evangelists who have milked their people out of every cent they could so they could live in luxury. We diocesan priests are given a set income no matter where we are stationed, but that has not prevented some priests from finding ways to supplement their income by dipping into the till. A few weeks ago I was about to mention something that I had read regarding a priest from my home parish St James in Totowa, New Jersey. He had made a beautiful statement regarding 9/11. I did a search to be sure I had his first name correct. That is when I learned that he has charges on him for pocketing the second collection for years and years. That was quite upsetting to me and, I am sure, even more upsetting to the people who are members of what is now his former parish. I cannot help but think about Fr. Francis Reilly, one of my inspirations to become a priest. When I grew up I saw how Fr. Reilly made so many personal sacrifices to build up St. James. He even slept in the sacristy. He left a parish with a new church, a school, a rectory and a convent for the sisters. Stealing from St. James was stealing Fr. Reilly's work. All those who use the Church for their own financial gains will have to answer for this.

We also need to be extremely careful that we don't repeat the sins of the pharisees. The pharisees started off well. They were concerned about serving God. That is why Jesus told the people to learn from them. But then He told them not to do what they were doing. The pharisees were concerned that others treat them with great respect. Their pseudo-holiness was for their own self-glory, not for the glory of God. They didn't care for the vineyard. They cared for themselves. They loved their positions of esteem in the community. Therefore they were opposed to the one who questioned them, opposed even to the point of killing Him. The vineyard was their claim to holiness. They did not want this Jesus, this person who associated with everyday people, to manifest His true holiness, His true ownership of the vineyard. He had to be killed.

We need to take care that we do not act like the Pharisees did. We need to be careful of seeing ourselves as better than others and therefore deserving particular respect. This can be seen in members of the Church in general, and it can be in members of particular movements within the Church. There are some people who have fallen for the lie that the only real Catholics are those who follow the extreme views of radical internet sites purporting to be Catholic. By the way, these groups who have declared war on priests, bishops, and particularly the Holy Father, are not Catholic. At best, they are schismatics.

We have been called to bring Christ to others. We have no right to put ourselves above others. We have been given the mercy and grace of God to serve His people. Without this mercy and Grace, we are nothing. That is the definition of a sinful life, nothingness. There are many movements and experiences available for us to strengthen our spirituality. These various spiritual experiences are given to us to help us to grow. But if we think that we are better than others because we are in this or that movement, then we are looking down on others and acting no differently than the pharisees. People who are full of themselves and their own spirituality are not all that different than the pharisees in the parable. That is why so many of the unchurched will say, "I don't go to Church because it is full of hypocrites."

I can remember reading C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* ages ago when I was in high school. In this fantasy, a devil, Uncle Screwtape, was educating his nephew, Wormwood, in the art of destroying a Christian Church. Wormwood had tried scaring people with diabolic visions, possession, and all sorts of other devious devices. To his surprise, Uncle Screwtape told him to forget about those things. He told him to concentrate on tempting people to think that they are better than others. That would be far more effective in destroying a Church than anything else.

So, putting this all together: We have been entrusted with the vineyard to bear fruit for others. This is a great honor. It is also a great responsibility. We need God's help to fight against the devastation occasioned by seeking material gains or human glory.

May God protect us from killing the presence of the Son in his own Father's vineyard.