

Sunday, October 5 – 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Fr. Joseph Towle, MM

Isaiah 5: 1-7	The prophet Isaiah speaks to the people of Judah, singing a song of a vineyard that produces wild (sour) grapes.
Philippians 4: 6-9	Paul writes a letter to the people of a church he founded in Philippi, a city of northeastern Greece. He encourages them “that the God of peace will guard their minds and hearts in Christ Jesus.”
Psalms 80	This psalm is a prayer for the restoration of the Lord’s Vineyard.
Matthew 21: 33-34	Jesus directs a parable of a failed vineyard to the chief priests and elders of Israel.

Wine was a very important beverage in the Ancient World and thus during the time of Isaiah and Jesus. One might say it was an essential drink, given the fact that water was generally unsafe to drink, contaminated, as it was, by animals and humans alike before reaching the family table.

In this situation the production of grapes was quite important, indeed, vital for the well being of society. Because of its alcoholic content, wine was free of harmful bacteria and amoebas and consumed freely by people who could afford to buy it. Jesus’ miracle at Cana changed water into wine in enormous quantities and saved the marriage feast from great embarrassment. Wine is life.

Both parables in today’s readings convey the importance of wine and the production of grapes and indicate a grave social cost – even a disaster – when the harvest fails. Here both harvests fail miserably causing the owner/production manager considerable embarrassment and anguish as well as a tremendous loss of investment. His anger pushes him into drastic action.

In Isaiah’s case, the owner’s ire flares up to such a degree that he declares the land a ruin, promising never to raise a hoe on it again and condemns it to return to briars and thorns.

Isaiah’s song is of his friend (God) and his vineyard (His people), who Isaiah judges has produced fruits of evil with their behavior. God had expectations that his people would live with (good) judgment, but instead they engaged in fratricide and bloodshed. He wanted them to be a just people, and for justice to rule their relationships with each other. Instead He heard the outcry of pain and grief issuing forth from the poor of the land. God urged His chosen people to produce good grapes and the reality was that they gave him sour grapes.

Jesus’ parable is quite similar to Isaiah’s and it is quite reasonable to imagine that Jesus is familiar with it and patterned his example upon it. Jesus modifies the example and instead of the land producing a bad harvest, He makes it clear that people by their evil intent and murderous deeds have thwarted God’s purposes for a profitable enterprise. The vineyard owner, too, is quite angry and sets out to destroy “those wretched men.”

God put humans on earth to share life and joy with them. Genesis makes this abundantly clear. Its rich story of the creation of the earth, of light and darkness, of all seeds and animals reveals the author’s concept of a generous Creator, who enhances the lives of the first human beings by creating them in His image and likeness. The story of the Fall ensues and the disobedient couple is cast out of the garden to live a very different life, a very hard life. Yet God does not leave them without hope because God’s plan of life-giving will come true; He insists on it.

The two parables reflect the narrative of Genesis: God's Plan of Life, the Failure and punishment of the disobedient. In Jesus' example, there is a new beginning, a new people and the promise of a harvest that God is looking for.

God does not give up on humans. He wants His way of justice and love to succeed even after decades and centuries of injustice and violence. It seems that humans never learn God's ways; yet God does not grow tired to trying again, teaching us through the pain and horror of war and injustice to seek a better way.

For Christians working in justice and peace work, God's example of patience is important. It gives us hope. In the midst of what seems like an insurmountable mountain of bloodshed and misery in so many nations of the world, it is easy to succumb to discouragement and pessimism. However, in reflecting on these readings, we acknowledge a God who continues to hold up the ideal of justice and non-violence, even with many setbacks. We, too, are called to imitate the zeal of God and not let the hard reality of bitter grapes and murderous behaviors defeat us. The Kingdom of God is present and will be present in fullness. Of that Jesus assures us.

For more information

To help keep God's kingdom of justice on your mind when you go to the voting booth, read Maryknoll's "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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