

## **Twenty Seventh Sunday of the Year October 08, 2017**

Isaiah 5:1-7    Philippians 4:6-9    Matthew 21:33-43

Christianity is a reality that can be experienced by each person who opens himself or herself to the dynamic presence of God in the world and particularly in the Church. In fact, it is only through the genuine experience of God's presence that we can bear the expected fruits of Christian life, the practical and operating acknowledgement of God as Lord of all, and an equally practical and operating love of others as the fundamental purpose of one's life. This Divine Christian life is placed within the dynamic of our natural lives so that, through the normal and natural events of our human lives, we express the fruits of the Divine life within us. It is important to remember that we need to experience the reality of God within us through a practical assimilation of our minds and hearts, in our thought and actions. It is this presence that, through our cooperation, will produce the fruits of Christian life, much more than the attempt at external, token, gestures of conformity to God's Will.

There is a disturbing, unsettling message in today's Readings. The reading from Isaiah speaks in allegorical form of a vine, planted and tended to by God, which produces only wild grapes. The prophet warns the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah that they, the vine, will be abandoned by God because of their injustice and non-observance of the Law. Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi contains a joyful in tone. It seems that they have produced fruits that correspond to the Gospel. St. Paul exhorts them to keep striving for all that is good and holy. In this way they need have no anxieties and the God of peace will be with them. In the Gospel the charge is leveled not against the failed produce, but the tenants, those temporarily in charge of the vineyard, failed to recognize the owner and his son. The chief priests and the elders, those to whom the parable is addressed, have no difficulty in recognizing the outrageous injustice of the tenants towards the vineyard's owner. Jesus then unveils the real application of truth of the parable, comparing it with the historical reception of God's prophets, and of the Son of God Himself, at the hands of the religious leaders.

In the first reading of today Prophet Isaiah uses the image of the vineyard carefully laid out and cared for by its owner, to depict the close relationship between God and the chosen people. God loved the chosen people and granted special protection and privileges to them. These chosen people of Isaiah's day

were well aware of all that God had done for them in the past. Under this image of the wine-grower who had done everything he could do to make his vineyard fertile and productive, the prophet describes God's care for and interest in his chosen people. This vineyard of God produces wild fruit, instead of real grapes, not fit to produce wine. The fault cannot be attributed to the owner who has done everything possible. He has cared for it and pruned and nursed his vineyard. In his anger and disappointment he decides to abandon the vineyard altogether. With its walls torn down, animals are free to graze in it. In time without care and water it will be overgrown with thorns and briars. In the same way the people had failed to respond to God who had done so much for them. They produced bloodshed instead of justice, and a rebellious outcry in place of true obedience. There is a critical flaw hidden deep within the grapes. This is the detail of the song that applies to the house of Israel and the people of Judah. God wanted them to serve the highest ideals of heaven. Instead they pursued earthly interests through oppression and violence.

In the second reading of today Paul is encouraging the converts of the Philippian community to place their full trust in God. Fervent prayer of thanksgiving and petition will keep their heart and mind on Christ. He tells them to make their needs known to God through their prayer with supplication and thanksgiving. The purpose of their prayer has to be adoration and gratitude. Such prayer he says removes anxiety and brings peace. He tells them that they should live exemplary Christian lives following the example of the Apostle. Their reward will be peace of mind in this life and everlasting peace in the world to come. Again, Paul exhorts them to put away all anxiety for temporal and spiritual affairs. The God who called them to Christian faith is ever close to them. All they have to do is to make their requests to him with confidence, thanking him for he has already done for them and asking for the further helps they need. He consoles them saying that their close union with God through their prayers will bring them peace on earth which is the foretaste of the true and everlasting peace of heaven. God the Father is the source of Peace and he unites us to Christ and removes all obstacles in our relationships. Finally, Paul recommends to them a whole set of Christian virtues which they should put into practice: whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious and anything worthy of praise that pleases God.

In today's Gospel we have the parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. Jesus tells this story to his opponents, namely the Chief Priests and the

Elders of the people, to show them that even though they are God's chosen people from the beginning, they have forfeited any claim to the new kingdom of God because of their disloyalty and disobedience to him. The purpose of the parable is as we find it in the gospel of Matthew to show that the death of Jesus at the hands of his opponents is consistent with the way God's messengers have been treated down the centuries. They were given a vineyard to cultivate but they claimed it as their own and refused not only to give any return to the true owner but murdered his own son who had come to them on behalf of his father. The Jews had totally failed in their task to prepare for the Messiah but instead they not only refused to listen to him, but chose to destroy him. The killing of the son "outside the city" is a clear reference to Jesus dying on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. Hence the chosen people will be replaced by other nations who will give proper returns to the owner. Jesus now directly asks the audience the question about the reaction to the story and the attitude of the owner. They answer correctly: he will put them to a miserable death and handover the vineyard to new tenants who will give him proper returns. Perhaps the leaders did not fully understand that it was intended towards them or looked at them to be the dishonest persons.

The parable clearly indicates that God's people had disappointed their God. It was the formerly sinful Gentiles who took on the task of building the Kingdom. This should not be understood as anti-Jewish. On the contrary this was being written by Christian Jews for Christian Jews and it must have been a painful thing for them to see and accept. The message clearly is that God's people have been poor tenants in the Lord's vineyard. The image of the vineyard is taken from the Old Testament and the servants mentioned in the parable represent the prophets who spoke on behalf of God and tried to bring them back. Instead of listening to their word they maltreated them and some they even killed. This current parable contains the allegorical elements in it. The vineyard is Israel, the tenant farmers are Israel's leaders, the householder is God, the servants are the prophets and the son is Jesus. The plot of the story reflects the practice in the first century Palestine of the absentee land owners letting out their vineyard to a farmer or a group of them who worked on them and received a small percentage of the profits. It was a system that worked providing the owner a huge profit. The tenants who had agreed to pay the rent had an obligation to fulfill and when they decided to kill the land owner's son thinking they will acquire the inheritance have made a

serious blunder. As long as the land owner is alive, the land legally belonged to him and he is the rightful owner.

Two leading thoughts come to our mind after listening to the parable of today. First we see the infinite goodness, patience and the mercy of God in his dealing with humankind and secondly, the unsounded depth of wickedness and ingratitude to which man can sink. To his chosen people God had given every good thing indicated in the image of the fertile vineyard: his revelation, protection, new land at Canaan and the promise of the messiah. But they had other plans and they wanted a kingdom on earth. Yet we God's patience with them, forgiving them time and time again, sending his messengers and kings and taking care of them. All he asked in return was their cooperation. But they had other plans: they wanted their kingdom on earth. Yet God was patient with them and again and again pardoned their infidelities. However, when the prophets were sent to them as his messengers they refused to accept them and did not listen to their warnings. Finally, the landowner, God, sent His only beloved Son Jesus to them, saying, "They will respect my Son." Rather than believing and accepting the teachings of Jesus as the Son of God and the promised Messiah, the chief priests and the Pharisees plotted against Him also and killed Him. They were afraid that the presence of Jesus would control their power and authority.

In this parable of today, the vineyard is the Kingdom of God. It is something which belongs to God and this vineyard will be finally preserved and the tenants will be replaced. Matthew here presents a quote from Psalm 118 verses 22 and 23 to indicate that the parable was applied to the Jewish people and to support the new ownership over the vineyard, that God will vindicate Jesus who has been rejected. Because of that rejection the Kingdom of God will be given to the Jewish Christian Community and the believing gentiles who will care for it and make sure that it produces the fruit. They were rejecting Jesus who would become the cornerstone, the source of stability and strength, and unity among the various races who would form his new kingdom. Matthew wants his readers to know that the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus are all a part of the greater plan of God. The parable has to be carefully read and understood and not mistakenly considers that Christianity has superseded Judaism. This is not what the parable wants to teach. It wants to tell us of the necessity of loyalty and obedience to the word and total responsibility in the salvific work of God that is given to each person. He now repeats in crystal clear language the truth he wished to

communicate to them. The gentiles will become God's new chosen people, as those chosen in the Old Testament had failed him.

The Gospel concludes with the words that the Kingdom of God will be given to a people that produce the fruits of the Kingdom. The fruits of the Kingdom are the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are as Paul tells the Galatians, "love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." These fruits of Christian life, as we know are beyond a mere doctrine or code of conduct, for Christianity is a reality that can be experienced by each person who opens himself or herself to the dynamic presence of God in the world and, particularly, in the Church. In fact, it is only through the genuine experience of God's presence that we can bear the expected fruits of Christian life, the practical and operating acknowledgement of God as Lord of all, and an equally practical and operating love of others as the fundamental purpose of my life. One could say that this Divine Christian life is placed within the dynamic of our natural lives so that, through the normal and natural events of our human lives, we express the fruits of the Divine life within us. It is important to remember that we need to experience the reality of God within us through a practical assimilation of our minds and hearts, in our thought and actions. It is this presence that, through our cooperation, will produce the fruits of Christian life, much more than the attempt at external, token, gestures of conformity to God's Will.

Today, we are God's people. We are the tenants in the vineyard. Now he expects us to produce fruit that will endure. The obvious question for us to ask ourselves today is: How are we doing? How much better are we than the chief priests, the elders, the Scribes and the Pharisees? We are specially privileged, by baptism, to be called to work in the Lord's vineyard. Time and time again we are invited to gather together to hear the Gospel message and to make it part of our lives. We are all called to be members, active members of the Body of Christ, the Christian community, the Church. Over the centuries, several prophets in our Christian communities have been rejected, abused and even killed. We think of Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Oliver Plunkett and, in our own times, Bishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, the countless victims of violence in Central and South America, in Africa, not to mention Northern Ireland. All these martyrs have one thing in common. They were killed not by pagans but by fellow-Christians, tenants in the Lord's vineyard. This week, let us all take a few moments to review our

status before God, asking ourselves if we will inherit the Kingdom of God. May the grace of God be with each and every one of you as you assess your spiritual status in the eyes of God.

One man went before God and asked for the gift of salvation. God asked him what he has done. He narrated to God and told him how he has not done any harm to any one, he has not robbed any person, has not been scandalous, avoided contacting people thinking they would be bad, not shown lust towards any woman, and has honoured God respectfully. In defense he told God and said, look God, see my hands. Look they are so clean. God sadly looked at him and said, yes they are clean but they are empty.

‘He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.’ This verse puzzled some women in a Bible study and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible Study. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot. The man said he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman asked the silversmith, ‘How do you know when the silver is fully refined?’ He smiled at her and answered, ‘Oh, that’s easy — when I see my image in it.’ If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has His eye on you and will keep watching you until He sees His image in you.

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