

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 5:1-7 / Matthew 21: 33-43)
08.10.2017

A somewhat simplistic, far too rapid interpretation of today's gospel parable would have us hang everything on its last line: *I tell you, then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.* Those words have been rather foolishly taken by many as Jesus heralding that the day of God's Chosen People Israel is over and a new people will now replace them. That is a very risky and, it must be said, an erroneous reading of Jesus' words. The Bible is clear when it states that God's promises are irrevocable. Does this not imply that God's Chosen People remains His Chosen People and that there is no end to Israel's election?

Doubtless, many have gone with what I have called a somewhat simplistic and far too rapid interpretation of the punchline of today's parable. Much disservice and injustice has been done by what can only be called an anti-Jewish reading of the gospels.

It is an erroneous understanding of today's gospel passage that has some people interpret its last line as Jesus making the following clear-cut claim, without any nuance whatsoever: the Jewish people have persecuted a whole succession of prophets who were sent by God and now they are preparing to kill Him, God's Only Begotten Son... They will pay dearly for their dastardly deed. God will get His revenge.

Fair enough, this interpretation can seem legitimate to some readers when they note that Jesus addressed His words *to the chief priests and the elders of the people.* It could be asked if Jesus' words are not a warning to these people that their time is up.

Let me plead caution here.

To go with this understanding – without nuance – is to opt for an incomplete reading of the whole of the Sacred Scriptures.

I don't think it can be accepted that Jesus declared that the Jewish People simply cannot be a sign of the coming of God's kingdom. I don't think it can be claimed that Jesus' words mean that the Church has now totally replaced Israel.

As I've said, it is important to hold the whole of the Bible together.

It is never good to isolate one verse of Scripture claiming that it says all that can be said on any given matter. (In so many domains we see the damage done by such an approach. One Scripture verse never says everything about any particular subject.)

... And so, while we read this morning's parable, we mustn't lose sight of the gospel claim that *salvation comes from the Jews.* We have Jesus' own word for this in John's gospel – chapter 4, verse 22.

This leads me to advocate that it is very important that we refine our understanding of the gospels' mention – and the wider New Testament's mention – of the Jews and the Jewish People.

In the New Testament the Jews are more than an ethnic race.

In the famous words of Pope Pius *we are all of us spiritual Semites.*

Yes, spiritually, we are all of us Jewish People.

This means that we should not be too quick to oppose the Jewish People and the Church. Certainly we shouldn't dare to claim that the Church has completely superseded or replaced the Jews.

What the Bible says is that we who are Gentiles are now part of *the Israel of God*.

The Israel of God is made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

The Israel of God are all those who have accepted and entered into God's Covenant love – whatever their ethnic origin.

Having stated this at the outset, let us now look a little more closely at some details of this morning's gospel parable to refine our understanding of it.

The first thing that strikes me in the parable we read today is the absence of God from the scene.

Did you notice that?

The owner of the vineyard is someone who is away. We are told that *the owner of the vineyard went abroad*. He leaves the care of the vineyard to others. It is for the tenants to make the vineyard bear fruit.

What we have here is something of the same thing we find in the story of the talents recorded in Matthew 25. In that gospel parable the king also goes away on a foreign trip and leaves the talents to those to whom he has chosen to confide them in the hope that they may make the most of them.

In both gospel parables God (the king) withdraws from the scene.

God's withdrawal from the scene is not confined to these two stories alone.

Those of you who are familiar with my reading of the Sacred Scriptures will recognise how I continually come back to the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is often through the lens of these first three chapters of Genesis that I am led to interpret much of the rest of the Bible.

(Some of you may have already heard me explain how this rather personal way of reading the Bible is rooted in a spiritual insight I was given as a boy by a Cistercian abbot who greatly influenced my childhood. How often I heard him claim that the whole of the Bible is in the opening of the Book of Genesis.)

In the Book of Genesis the point is made very early on that the Lord God leaves our first parents in the Garden. The Lord God establishes their life there and then He withdraws from the scene as it were.

We could say that once He has created Adam and Eve Elohim just leaves them in the Garden to get on with it. They are to care for the animals and the plants etc.

Just think about that... After all, we are all children of Adam and Eve.

Let's admit it, do we not have a certain difficulty with the idea of a God who chooses to be absent?

We find it hard to understand the absence of God in our own lives and in the life of the world all around us.

We'd much prefer that the Lord stay on the scene and totally in control.

People continually express shock around God's apparent absence – at least His non-intervention – in the affairs of this world.

We hear it asked – maybe we ask – where was God during hurricane Irma and other natural disasters of recent weeks?

Where is God as Hurricane Nate strikes Louisiana today?

Where is God when someone we love is dying an horrendous death in the prime of life about to leave a young family behind them?

Where was God when His Chosen People – the Jews – and others were being led to the gas chambers at Auschwitz and Birkenau? Why did God not intervene when the innocent were being led to the incinerators in those hellish places? Had the Lord not saved the three young boys from the blazing furnace in the Book of Daniel? Where was He in the 1940's then?

The mystery of God's non-intervention can really get to us and greatly disturb us.

Where is God when people suffer? I'm not a Jesuit, but let me answer that question with another. Where was He when Jesus died on Calvary?

The answer becomes a little clearer here – but, it remains, nonetheless, something hard for us to accept.

God is with those who suffer, just as God was in His suffering Christ.

When we feel devoid of God's presence in our lives because of our suffering and pain, it is vital to remember that God was there in Jesus hanging upon the cross upon Calvary's Hill. God was in the Crucified One. He is still there in all who are crushed and oppressed; He is with those who suffer and are put to death today. He is with us in our pain.

God withdraws from the scene, we have said, but only for a while... He returns.

The story of Jesus shows us how God comes back upon the scene, but not before time. God comes back only when it appears that all is over.

In Jesus' last words in John's gospel it is said *all is finished*.

And yet... and yet three days later, after the battle seems to be lost – victory is won. New life is given. Christ rises from the dead.

Put to death, Jesus doesn't reject His own. He doesn't reject those who had Him crucified. He comes back to them to offer them redemption.

... Let's return to today's vineyard story – not that we strayed away from it completely.

We might ask: what was the fruit the vine was meant to bear?

What is the vineyard meant to produce today?

What are those who are left in charge of the world meant to produce as its vintage in every age and generation?

The ultimate fruit awaited by the Master from His tenants, and by God from us and from all those in whom He places His confidence, is the fruit of love: love is the fruit we are all meant to bear.

Now love is God Himself. St John writes *God is love*. Love makes God present. Through love God comes back into the story.

Think about that...

Our love makes God's present! What tremendous responsibility has been confided to us!

Genesis 3 – the story of Cain and Abel – shows us how love is not always the fruit humanity bears.

In the story of the Fall murder occurred where mutual love is what the Lord wanted the brothers in the story to make manifest by their care for each other.

What the Lord wants for us and what the Lord wants from us is love and life.

The choice before us is always the same: it is between good and evil, between life and death, between love and hate.

At the heart of the Christian story stands the cross: a symbol of evil, hate and death. The cross is at the centre of the Christian life, but it isn't the end of the Christian life. The story doesn't end at Golgotha.

Beyond the stark tree of the cross which bore Calvary's bitter fruit of disgrace, guilt and shame there is a garden in which a crop of fresh new fruits grow: life, love, goodness, forgiveness.

The *New People of God* who live in the Garden – the new Eden – are none other than the old People of God renewed – brought back to life and given a fresh start with Christ.

The *New People of God* are all of us who have allowed what St Paul calls the *old man* within us to be replaced by the *new man*: Christ.

We who were once afar are brought back close.
Those who were seemingly rejected are chosen anew.
We are chosen anew every time we repent.

The Garden of Eden which bore bitter fruit is now succeeded by the Easter Garden wherein Jesus has only this word to speak: *Shalom... Peace*.
That peace – *Shalom* – is plenitude of life, fullness, completion, wholeness... true well-being. It is God's life renewed within us.

Amen!