

October 4, 2020
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 5:1-7 (p.214)
Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-34

Sorry so late to internet!

It seems like the world, the flesh, and the devil keep beating on our doors. The news about our President, the first lady, and some of his staff testing positive for Covid-19 prompted many folks into thinking – what, if anything, more could happen to disrupt a country already under a great deal of stress?

Needless to say, we having nothing to fear because God is still on His throne, and everything that happens in this world is perfectly going according to His divine will and purposes.

In our second reading this morning St. Paul wrote to the Philippian churches, which also includes you and me this encouraging word, “Have no anxiety at all but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, make your request known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Repeat)

We will speak more on this passage later, but for now let’s consider that there is nothing in this world that will produce more anxiety than harboring a negative attitude about one’s circumstances or holding a grudge or resentment towards God or towards another person. Stored bitterness and fear can become a cancerous toxic waste to the soul. It’s like a ravaging acid that does more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to whom on it is poured.

Unresolved bitterness, resentment, and the unwillingness to embrace one's own emotions and passions can eat away at the heart often leaving their victims sickly and some even sick unto death.

For example, consider this morning's Gospel reading. A landowner planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press and built a tower and then leased it out to some tenants. For all intents and purposes the landowner did a good thing; indeed, he in essence blessed the people of that community.

Providing jobs and a renewable commodity that everyone could enjoy; certainly, the tenants should have been happy with their opportunity. But, as the story unfolds they were not appreciative; instead they were jealous thinking the Master's gain belonged to them.

Their reasoning already skewed by bitterness and skepticism they thought that they were the ones putting forth the effort and doing all the work in the vineyard? What they completely forgot was that it was the Lord God who gave them the opportunity to prosper in the first place.

Subsequently when the landowner sent his servants to collect his portion of the finished products instead of showing kindness and generosity they ignored him, and eventually with hardened hearts they beat the messengers one by one.

Finally in an effort to reconcile their differences, the landowner sent his son, thinking they would respect him, but alas they killed him as well. Somehow, the tenants thought that if they killed the landowner's heir they would gain access to ownership of the vineyard. Talk about ignorance, what were they thinking?

Well, you can guess the rest of the story; the landowner himself came back to the vineyard and gave them all what they deserved, a horrible and wretched death; and thereafter, he leased his vineyard to some other tenants who promised to be more faithful and honorable.

Referring once again to Blessed Theophylact's, *Commentary On The Gospel of Matthew*, the scholarly saint mentions that the landowner is the Father in Heaven and his son who was killed is the Lord Jesus Christ. He then equates the tenants with the Jewish religious leaders who spurned the Messiah and thereby brought judgment upon the whole nation of Israel.

Here it is important to emphasize that a greater judgment often rests on those who for all intents and purposes should know better. God always holds to a higher standard those to whom much is given, much is required; indeed, all the more reason to pray for those who are in positions of authority, and all those who have been exposed to the truth.

The fact of the matter is that because Israel's leaders refused to obey God and believe in His Son, God removed them from their original place in the Kingdom and gave their position to the Church, which if they are willing includes the Gentile nations.

Unfortunately, many Christians assume that because they have been grafted into the vine their position in Heaven is secure without any works of righteousness. Blessed Theophylact states that here the prophet Isaiah would liken their lack of righteousness to wild grapes not fit for wine making.

In other words, because they think they are saved, they assume that they can disregard God's commandments, live like the world and not suffer the consequences. Basically, they live according to their own understanding not considering that if God once before charged tenants for their lack of fruit, He is certainly not beneath doing it again.

It is interesting to note that when we compare today's Gospel reading with the OT reading from Isaiah, and then coupled with the reading from Psalm 80, all three readings include references to grape vines and vineyards as part of the main subject. However, in the Gospel reading the emphasis was placed on the tenant's reluctance in giving back to the landowner the pre-agreed portion of the vineyard's produce, while Isaiah addressed the unproductivity of the grape vines themselves, while at the same time the psalmist focused on the mercy of God's willingness to heal and restore both.

Years before the life and poetry of Isaiah, the psalmist Asaph described a vine from Egypt being transplanted in a region cleared of other nations. Written somewhere between 1010-970 B.C. the prose highlights the restoration of the nation of Israel through prayer and God's mercy. Combining hope with the memory of great sorrow, the images of Israel as a vineyard and God as a shepherd are both utilized here.

Speaking concerning the nation of Israel, the psalmist described how because of disobedience God allowed the walls of protection to be broken down, thus allowing its natural enemies to invade its boundaries. Meanwhile the writer pleaded with God to have mercy, look down from heaven, and take care of His planting.

In addition, he revealed a hidden prophetic promise in that he asked the Lord God to bring to fruition the Son of Man, a type of the fruit of the vine whom God will make strong to lead His people. Hence he pleaded, “Then we will no more withdraw from you: give us new life, and we will call upon your name. O Lord, God of hosts, restore us; if your face shine upon us, then we will be saved.”

History has a unique way of repeating itself, and so here is the challenge for us today, if we do not learn from the mistakes of our forefathers, we’ll be more likely to slip in the same places and then fall for the same reasons as did they. What the Holy Spirit has warned concerning Israel is certainly apropos for the Church today.

Jesus said, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This was the Lord’s doing and it was marvelous in our eyes.” He then went on to say, “therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on the stone will be broken; but whomever it falls, it will grind him into powder.” Indeed, not a pretty sight.

Here we understand this passage to mean that if we humble ourselves and fall upon the Lord asking for grace and mercy, we will be saved; but, if we resist His grace and mercy, His righteous judgment will fall upon us we will suffer the consequences.

Hence all the more reason to believe that what was proclaimed, as judgment against Israel’s leaders and the nation ought to be considered as fair warning for all members of the Universal Church. Any person, leader, or organization that strays from the

elementary truths found in Scripture and Tradition (with a capital T) is subject to judgment and chastisement.

Here the Lord Jesus wants the Body of Christ to be one in unity, she is not to be humanly divided, nor is she to be schizophrenic in identity, mission, and/or purpose.

So then - on a practical basis how are we today to go about being found as faithful co-laborers in the Divine Master's vineyard, or the Kingdom of God? What can we do to insure that our attitudes stay pure and our good works remain constant?

The answer is in essence quite simple. It is simple because the answer refers back to the laws of sowing and reaping, and loving your neighbor as yourself. If you do well towards others you will receive good back. If you sow discord you will reap discord. Whatever you put forth in word, thought, and/or deed you will receive back in the same kind with an added abundance.

Needless to say, it is a well-recognized axiom that if you project happy thoughts concerning a person you are more likely to receive happy thoughts back from them. Try this experiment sometime, try smiling at people and see if they will smile back, by the same token if you wave - many people will wave back. Barring folks who have been traumatized in the past, most people if you treat them rightly, they will treat you in like kind. Treat them badly, and they will react negatively.

The same principles are in effect concerning giving back to God the first fruits of our labor. You may recall - earlier we commented on the fact that the Gospel reading addresses the fate of the tenants withholding the portion due the landowner after the harvest. Here we recognize that for the use of the landowner's

vineyard and his wealth, the tenants were required to give back to the owner a share in their yearly production of wine.

The exact amount is not recorded in the Gospel, but a first fruits offering was usually considered to be a tenth. But in this case, they refused, and well you know the rest of the story. One thing led to another and eventually they lost their income and some even lost their lives.

You see, the giving of our firstfruits to God is not an option as the wicked tenants soon learned. Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." Here again, am I the person who says yes and does nothing, or do I initially resist and then eventually go on to do what is right?

Either way the choice is mine to make, but the consequences, well the consequences for either choice are clearly recorded in the sacred text. "If [you are] willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land: But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it"

We need to do what is asked of us, especially in the Church, the Church ought to be an example of obedience and goodwill, a light house set on a hill shining brightly demonstrating to all that God is with His people.

In conclusion, let us continue to pray for both Church and civil leadership that they might be found humble and faithful. In addition let us also pray that the Holy Spirit will keep all of us blameless and faithful so that when He returns to collect His first fruits, He will find His servants joyful in the giving of an increase that has been multiplied one hundred fold.

For we pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. + Amen.