

Homily Notes for Sunday, Oct 8, 2017, 27 Sunday in Ordinary Time A
Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:9,12-20, Philippians 4:6-9, Matthew 21:33-43

How are we doing as the vineyard of the Lord?

1. Summary: The common theme of today's readings is the necessity (duty) of bearing fruit in the Christian life, and the consequent punishment for sterility, ingratitude, wickedness, and sin.

2. The Old Testament Situation: Isaiah was a citizen of the southern kingdom of Judah. Assyria was the dominant power and it had conquered the northern kingdom in 721 BC. With the death of King Uzziah, Judah's time of prosperity and national glory had come to an end. The shadow of Assyria lay menacingly over the land. But the spiritual crisis of Judah was even more serious than the threat of physical destruction. The same greed, hypocrisy, and injustice that Amos had excoriated in northern Israel were sapping the spiritual integrity of Judah. The source of the problem was the lack of faith.

The key image this morning is the *vineyard*, representing the People of God, the Church, us!

3. In today's first reading, which is called **Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard**, the prophet describes God's care for, and interest in, His Chosen People. *"What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?"* Yahweh asked. Following the classic biblical imagery, Isaiah describes Israel as a non-productive vineyard. Though God had done everything necessary to produce a good crop, the vineyard yielded only "wild grapes." This image is found throughout the Old Testament for Israel, and now applies to us, the Church, the New Israel.

Let's look at this image a little deeper.

4. In the Old Testament the image of the vineyard represents God's people. Note that it now represents His Church. *The New Jerusalem Bible* says of the vineyard image:

"The theme of Israel as a vine, chosen and then rejected, had been introduced by Hosea, 10:1, and was to be taken up by Jeremiah, 2:21; 5:10; 6:9; 12:10, and Ezekiel, 15:1-8; 17:3-10; 19:10-14; cf. Ps 80:8-18; and Is 27:2-5. Jesus gave it a new twist in the parable of the wicked husbandmen in Mt 21:33-44 and parallel gospel passages. In John 15:1-11. Jesus unfolds the mystery of the 'true' vine. Other aspects of the vine theme appear in Dt 32:32-33 and [Sirach] 24:17."

This powerful prophetic allegory was so well-known that Jesus' Jewish audience immediately understood that He was talking about them in the parable. But now Jesus makes changes in Isaiah's imagery. He makes Himself the vineyard owner's son and adds the concept of "tenant-farmers." Here, instead of Yahweh destroying the wild vines, the owner kills the evil servants and gives the vineyard to others who will produce good fruit for him.

Let's look at the situation from God's point of view.

5. Bad grapes in the vineyard of the Lord. From the call of Abraham (about 1800 B.C.), and especially after the Exodus (1300 B.C.), God had continuously blessed his people. But Israel — God's vineyard — failed Him miserably, producing wild and bitter grapes. Israel disobeyed Him by perpetuating injustice and shedding the blood of the innocent. He sent His prophets to reveal Himself and His message to the Jews, but He has sent his own divine Son to live and die among us.

As our transition to the New Testament, now we are those called by God to produce good fruit.

6. By baptism, which Jesus instituted, we are made the children of God and heirs of heaven. But if we are cold toward God and allow ourselves to get caught up in sins, we would remain more ungrateful than the Israelites. Thus, we, too, can be an unproductive vineyard. What does God say that he will do with that which is unproductive? Our heavenly Father says He will destroy it, laying it waste. Let us pay attention to this strong warning and become His grateful, obedient and generous children. Doesn't this mean that we need to get our lives in order now?

7. The second reading (Philippians 4:6-9): Since the Christians at Philippi received the gospel enthusiastically and continued to support Paul after he had evangelized them, Paul tells them affectionately of the high expectations he has for them and shows them how they are to become fruit-producing Christians. They are a good example for us as we grow in our relationship to God through adoration and thanksgiving and in our relationship with others through justice and mercy.

Let's take some time to understand Jesus's words more deeply.

8. The Gospel: Jesus has now arrived for the last time in Jerusalem. Jesus tells this parable of the wicked tenants while he is preaching during Passover week in the Temple in Jerusalem. Last week we studied the parable of the two sons. This story is one of the three "*parables of judgment*" which Jesus told in response to the question put forward by the Scribes and the Pharisees about his authority to teach in the Temple. It was intended to be a strong warning to the Jews in general and to the Scribes and the Pharisees in particular as they were planning to kill Jesus, the Messiah for whom Israel had waited for centuries. The importance of this parable is shown by its appearance in all the three Synoptic Gospels.

9. The background of the parable: The parable reflects the frictions in tenant- landlord relations in Palestine. Most of the vineyards were owned by rich, absentee landlords living in Jerusalem, Damascus or Rome who leased their lands to tenants and were interested only in collecting rent. The country was seething with economic unrest. The working people were discontented and rebellious, and the tenant farmers had picked up the revolutionary slogan, "land for the farmer." Hence, they often refused to pay the rent previously agreed upon and in some cases assaulted the landowner's representatives. It is natural, then, that Jesus' parable should reflect the popular hatred of foreign domination and the monopolizing of agricultural land by a rich minority who supported Roman rule. This is much like today's Latin America.

10. The meaning of the parable: This parable contains several different meanings. Like the Jews, the second- and third-generation Christians also understood God as the landlord. The servants sent by the landowner represented the prophets of the Old Testament. They were to see to it that God's chosen people produced fruits of justice, love and righteousness. But the people refused to listen to the prophets and produced the bitter grapes of injustice, immorality and idolatry. They persecuted and killed the prophets. (See 1 Kings 19:10, 14; 2 Chron 24:18-22; 36:15-16; Acts 7:51-53; Matt 23:29-39).

As a final attempt, the landowner sent his son, (Jesus), to collect the rent (fruits of righteousness), from the wicked tenants (the Jews). But they crucified him and continued to lead a life of disloyalty and disobedience. Hence, God's vineyard was taken away from His chosen people and was given to a people (Gentile Christians), who were expected to produce the fruits of righteousness.

Let us think how to apply this to our lives.

11. Application: The Lord's vineyard now is the Church, and we Christians are the tenants from whom God expects fruits of righteousness. The parable warns us that if we fail to become productive, we also could be replaced as the old Israel was replaced by the "new" Israel. In the parable, *the rent* the tenants refuse to pay stands for *spiritual fruitfulness* of the People of God.

12. Bible passages highlighting our duty as privileged and blessed to be fruitful in serving others:

1. **Luke 12:47-48** – from everyone who has been given much, much will be required.
2. **John 15:1-11** – every branch of the vine that does not bear fruit will be cut off.
3. **Matthew 25:14-30** – everyone who receives "talents" from the Lord must be productive.

Key questions for us and our family

13. What good fruits is God expecting from, us, his vineyard? Where can I improve? What sins are adding bitterness to the fruits of my life?

Let us think which of the fruits of the Spirit (See Gal 5:22-23 & CCC 1832). They are "charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity."

14. Am I following the Ten Commandments correctly? Am I obeying and helping my parents? As a student am I studying hard so that I can be better prepared to serve God's people in the world and in the Church? Some key areas:

1. **Marriage and Sexuality (Protecting the Family).**
2. **Use of money and resources (Funding the Mission).**
3. **Availability of ourselves as servants (Obedience and Service).**