

This is the third weekend in a row we've heard parables from Jesus related to vineyards. Jesus knew the vineyard stories in today's first reading and today's psalm – they are probably the background for the vineyard parable we heard from him today.

Our first reading is from about eight centuries before Jesus. Jesus' audience knew Isaiah had condemned Jerusalem and its leaders with this story of a vineyard and its bad fruit. After hundreds of years of God preparing the people of Israel, the leadership and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were supposed to be in a covenant relationship with God. Despite God's faithfulness, the people had broken that relationship. If Jerusalem was the vineyard of the Lord, it was supposed to produce good grapes, but instead it produced wild grapes - grapes too bitter for making wine – bitter grapes that signify the wickedness and sin of the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Jesus' audience also knew the psalm that we just heard. It's a prayer to God for protection of his vineyard - the House of Israel.

In the Gospel today, Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and the elders in Jerusalem in the days before his execution with what is called the parable of the wicked tenants. Similar to our first reading, characters include the vineyard owner – God; the servants of the owner - the prophets; the tenants who work the vineyard - the chief priests and the elders. Jesus adds the son as a character.

The audience knew that this was not an ordinary father, and this was not an ordinary son. Obviously, the son represents Jesus. The chief priests and elders even said after hearing the parable that the father was going to kill the wicked tenants and give the vineyard to someone else. They were probably not very happy with this story. You could say that this dangerous parable was one of the things that got Jesus killed.

This parable of the wicked tenants doesn't just apply to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, it also applies to us. God has called all of us “to bear good fruit for good wine.” God asks us to remember who made us, who has loved us since before we were conceived because he wants the best for us. God asks us to gather to worship every weekend so that we get a reminder that God is God, and we are not God. We gather for a reminder that we are to put God's will first, not ours. God doesn't need these things, but he knows that we need these constant reminders.

We need reminders when we forget that it was God who made us and who redeemed us. We need reminders when we forget that we are dependent on God, because then we begin to see ourselves as independent and self-sufficient. We begin to resent God's commands as an inconvenience - as an intrusion on our freedom to do what we want. An invasion of our “safe space.” Then God's messengers – his Church – become annoying to us and we stop listening.

Jesus is telling us that we need to do the work that shows that we are truly workers in the vineyard of the Lord. Our job in this vineyard is not to do our will, our job is to do the will of the vineyard owner. As disciples of Jesus, we are the people who are supposed to produce good fruit.

As citizens in the world's leading democracy, Catholics in the United States have special responsibilities as workers in his vineyard - to protect human life and dignity and to stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We are called to welcome the stranger, to combat discrimination, to pursue peace and to promote the truth of the Church. Catholic social teaching calls us to practice civic virtues and offers us the principles to shape our participation in public life. We can't be indifferent to - or cynical about - these obligations of citizenship.

These days there are plenty of wild grapes among many self-professed Catholics of our world- the ones who answer survey questions professing to be Catholic, but who are not working in God's vineyard. God has showered us with his grace through the Church – her teaching and her sacraments. We are meant to cooperate with that grace – to respond to God's grace so that we can live complete and happy lives. If two thirds of Catholics stay away from the Eucharist – that allows the vineyard to fall into ruin.

When we fail to do God's will and when we ignore the cry of the oppressed that Isaiah talks about, saying that "I am a Catholic" is not enough. We also need to do the work that bears the fruit that shows that we are true workers in God's vineyard.

The first thing we do at this Eucharist is remember with gratitude all God has done for us as individuals and as a community. We give glory to God and listen to his word. The table that will soon be set before us is a meal for all - for the rich, the poor, the powerful and the weak - to eat the same food. Then we are sent to practice in our lives what we do here at this Eucharist.

After all God has done for us, God expects that we live in right relationship to one another through honesty in those relationships. God expects the poor and the weak to be treated properly. Those should be the characteristics of a people and a nation who claim to be "under God."

We are called to care for human life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable among us. That is why this little parish supports our incarcerated brothers in our local state prisons. That is why this little parish supports those in need of food through the Middletown Choice Market. That is why this little parish supports those in search of housing through Family Promise. That is why this little parish supports the Community Pregnancy Center. And that's just part of our work in this little vineyard. Amen?

With thanks to Brant Pitre and Jude Siciliano, O.P.

- Deacon Jack Schaefer