

Parable of the Wicked Tenants

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

October 4, 2020

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-14

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's gospel, Jesus has given us another parable about vineyards. It was a favorite allegory for him; he is like a winegrower, offering his public several different tasting experiences. Today's parable is like a Côte du Rhône, a peppery and savory wine made from Grenache or Syrah grapes.

Like all good wines, his parable offers a mixture of flavors. If we take time to consider the various parts of the parable, its meaning soon becomes apparent. There is a landowner, the lord of the manor, who plants a vineyard and leases it to tenants. The owner of the vineyard stands for God and the religious and political leaders of Israel are the tenants. The slaves sent to collect the produce are the prophets, who are either beaten, stoned or killed. Jesus is the son of the landowner, and when he comes to the tenants they seize him and put him to death.

The parable is directed primarily at the chief priests and Pharisees who oppose Jesus. When they hear his words, and understand that he is speaking about them, they want to arrest him. However, they fear the reaction of the crowds, and so do nothing. In this story, Jesus rebukes the religious leaders of the day, and then adds something new, when he says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone", by which he means himself.

As I was meditating on this parable, I found unexpectedly larger and broader questions coming into my mind; questions such as "What is the nature of the Universe?" and "What is God like?" and even the question, "Do you believe in God?"

I want to try and answer these questions, which seem to flow from the parable itself. If that seems hard to fathom, I hope to explain why. Let's deal first with the question, "What is God like?" That is the easiest to answer. Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9) Jesus, therefore, is the revelation of God. To know what God is like, you need to know Jesus. Having said that, I would go further and say that it is not enough simply to know Jesus in order to know God; you have to *follow* Jesus as well, if you are to fully know and experience what God is like.

The next question is, "What is the nature of the Universe?" I have to admit I am not a physicist or qualified in any way to talk about how the universe was formed. Some people say that the universe is a place of limitless chaos but I see it differently. I see an organizing principle at work. I thought about this when I read the parable about the vineyard. In the story, the vineyard did not spring up out of nowhere. It was planted by the landowner, "who put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower." The vineyard was therefore created for a purpose.

In the same way, when I look up at the sky at night, and see the stars, I see an organizing principle at work. "Nonsense", I hear you say, "it's just millions of stars randomly assembled by chance." If that's so, it is amazing then that they form themselves into such distinct

patterns and shapes. Let's consider something more down to earth. The world itself is subject to natural laws and there seems to be a clear organizing principle at work here. On Earth there is life in extraordinary abundance and variety but only, so far as we know, on Earth. It is a kind of miracle that we exist at all, and to have the consciousness of our existence as well, is both a wonderful and a dangerous thing. I say "dangerous", because our self-consciousness can lead us to think that we have supreme authority over all of creation and, by extension, over other people.

Our vineyard in today's gospel is like a little microcosm of Earth. It is made by God and organized according to his own principles, but then he leaves us in charge of it and that's when the trouble starts. In this cosmic story we are the tenants who are left to grow and harvest the produce. It's not difficult to see this parable through the lens of our own experience, especially if we are parents or teachers or political leaders or founders of religious groups. There comes a time when we have to let go of our control of the people under our care and allow them the freedom to work and enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

With freedom comes responsibility. True freedom comes from knowing God's will and doing it. The tenants in the parable have self-consciousness but lack wisdom, and plot to take ownership of the vineyard by killing the landowner's son. They are thinking of taking power and property for themselves, but then reap the consequences of their foolishness, when the landowner puts the murdering tenants to a miserable death.

This story is about having a false understanding of the nature of the world and of God's plan. If we believe in God, then we must believe that from the death of Jesus on the cross, God brought forth a remarkable and enduring victory. The selfish tenants, some of whom are still with us today, thought they had won. But since they did not bother to know God, they were incapable of predicting the outcome: they never expected a resurrection that would change the future of humankind.

Growing in faith means growing in what I call "God consciousness", which enables us to see clearly, and less in self-consciousness, which leads to blindness. Opening our eyes to God's presence in our lives enables us see how God is in control of the cosmic order, along with the smaller events of human life. Any march in human "progress" which discards God ultimately leads to disaster.

I once knew someone who spent a summer in France, working in a vineyard, picking grapes by hand. It was hard work, and at the end of the day, the laborers would gather in a part of the vineyard and drink the wine made by the vineyard. It was a perfect end to the day, spent in fellowship with those who had worked in the vineyard together. I remembered this story as I read the parable. I can't think of a better image for the kingdom of heaven. No wonder Jesus thought the vineyard was a good allegory for teaching.

With peace and blessings

Father David