

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 4, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church

A Reflection on Scripture: *The Vineyard Parables*

Three of the four readings today are parables about vineyards.

Isaiah tells of his friend who plants and cares for his vineyard. He does everything he can to produce succulent, bountiful fruit. Instead he gets wild grapes. Beware Israel. You are the people of God. God planted you, tended to you and cared for you. In return you produce sinfulness and idolatry. You squander all that God has given to you. When the time comes, God will leave you to rot in the fields.

The reading from Isaiah forecasts Israel's downfall and suffering. Psalm 80 bemoans the fate Israel has already suffered. On behalf of Israel the psalmist prays: "God, we are the vine you transplanted from Egypt. You nurtured us in the land you had prepared for us. Now we are ruined. Other people take our fruit. Wild animals tear us up." "Please God, have pity on us. Protect us. We are your people; we will never be unfaithful again."

In the Gospel's vineyard parable, Jesus tells of a man who builds an exemplary vineyard. He leases it out to tenants. The arrangement is that the tenants will give the owner some of their produce as rent. When the owner sends his servants to collect the produce, the tenants abuse them, killing one of them. Then the owner sends his son. The tenants murder his son as well. Jesus asks, "What will the owner do to these wicked tenants?" The chief priests and elders answer that the owner will kill the tenants and find new ones who will give him the produce due to him. Jesus tells them: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

Applying these parables to myself, I imagine my parents saying, "I'm disappointed in you." That phrase hurt me more than any punishment. "Look at all we have done for you, and this is how you thank us?"

One way to assess our stewardship is by using the standard articulated in Matthew 7:16, "By their fruits you will know them." That quote is not from one of today's readings, but it is pertinent.

If we are judged as stewards by the fruits we produce, how will we measure up? As stewards of God's vineyards, we will be found wanting. We haven't properly cared for the earth or her people. We have wasted much of what God has given us. The earth is getting sicker. We have frighteningly little time to improve its health. We continue to have a racial divide. Many of us are thinking about white privilege for the first time. The gap between the rich and poor is growing. Greed is choking us. If the fruits of our democracy are the responsibility of the people, what does that say about us?

I'm writing this reflection before Pope Francis issues *Fratelli Tutti*, his new encyclical on Solidarity and Human Fraternity. It will be issued on October 3, before most of you read this. I don't know what the encyclical will say, but I'll wager that it will be consistent with something Fr. Chase emphasized in last week's homily. Before we can start reforming institutions, we must reform ourselves.

As stewards, we face daunting problems. With God's help we can solve them. But first we need to look at ourselves. Better to ask: Am I selfish? Am I kind? Do I listen? Am I aware of those suffering around me? Do I acknowledge that I am a sinner? Do I face difficult truths? What are the fruits I personally am producing?

How will addressing our own failings help address the terrible problems we face as a society? This is what faith looks like in our time. I must have faith that if I act like a Christian, others will act like Christians. I have to have faith that if enough of us act like Christians we can solve the huge problems we face. I don't mean just Christians, the same holds true for other religions and for other people without an organized religion.

It takes great faith to believe that my behavior and actions will be matched by others to the benefit of all. It takes greater faith to act as if my efforts will be matched by others when I harbor serious doubts. This is a time when great faith is needed.

Jim Casey