

Commentary to the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time



The parable in today's gospel begins with numerous references to the first reading from the prophet Isaiah. In that reading a vineyard is meticulously prepared. It is put on good ground; the soil is spaded; it is cleared of stones; the very best of vines are planted; a hedge is put up to keep the animals out, and a watchtower is built to protect the vineyard from thieves. But the vineyard is still a failure. You get the sense that despite the preparations, the vineyard refused to produce good grapes. This points to the Hebrew people who were lovingly prepared to bear fruit for God, but who rejected God.

The Lord complains that He looked for justice. Biblically, justice means a relationship where the people are one with God. Instead, the people rejected God and chose bloodshed. Today's Gospel repeats God's complaint, only the parable becomes more specific. What was it that the people had done and were still doing?

They rejected God's emissaries, the prophets. Later on in the twenty-third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus would weep over Jerusalem because the city kills the prophets and stones God's messengers. What is worse, like in the parable, the son, Jesus himself, would be taken outside of the vineyard, outside of the city and killed. As you know, Jesus was not crucified in Jerusalem, but on that horrible hill, Golgotha, just outside of the city walls. Why?

Why did they hate him so much as to demand his crucifixion? Jesus upset the status quo, their cushy lifestyle. The chief priests, the Sanhedrin and all the leaders of the people had a comfortable living. Then this Jesus shows up, not just challenging their authority, but demonstrating to the people that their leaders were concerned about themselves, not concerned about caring for God's people. Those with power did not want to be challenged by anyone, certainly not by some commoner from Galilee. Even worse, they knew that He was right. But following Him would demand that they change their lives radically. They would not do this. Jesus had to go. So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. But they could not destroy God's plan. The Kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a people that would produce fruit.

When you think about it the readings are a bit scary, absolutely frightening to tell the truth. The readings are demanding that we bear fruit or have the Kingdom of God taken from us. This is contrary to the popular feel good concept of Divine Justice. I am referring to the attitude in life that results from reducing God to a Barney figure who does not hold us accountable for our actions. Yes, we commend our dead to the mercy and compassion of God. And yes, we ask Mary to pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. But our prayers do not absolve us from our present responsibility to live as the Lord told us to live and to do the work of God. We have to move from the mentality that we can get away with purposely behaving badly, acting without concern for the consequences of our actions. All of us are tempted to believe that God will forgive us no matter how badly or how often we reject Him. This is contrary to Scripture. This is why we teach our children from the time they can understand right and wrong about sin and responsibility, God's love and mercy. Sure, their sins are as little as they are.

And it often takes a lot of self control on the part of the priests hearing their confessions to keep from laughing, particularly when they tell you things like, "I called my brother a poopy face," but the child has learned it is wrong to say nasty things to others, and that he or she is not behaving like God calls him or her to behave. The forgiveness of penance is tied to a determination to fight against sin. This is something that even a little child understands. Mommy and Daddy forgive, but call them to be better. God does the same, only with an infinitely deeper understanding of the person seeking forgiveness. Many of our Middle School, High School and college students experience classmates doing really bad things involving disrespect of others as well as disrespect for their own bodies. Our young people often feel that they are surrounded by people who act as though there are no consequences for their selfishness. They, and all of us for that matter, are tempted to think that since our own sins are not as horrible as those around us, we do not need to be concerned about the consequences.

I often tell them that it is the good kid who stumbles just once that is often seated in the back seat of the police car while the ones who are habitual offenders look on and laugh. Their actions, although more frequent and worst, do not lessen the gravity of those of the one in that back seat. I am sure many of us, beginning with me, have said to the police officer who stops us for speeding, "But I was not going as fast as the other cars," only to hear, "You were still speeding." Our actions are judged in themselves, not in relationship to the actions of others. In the end, as Blessed Mother Theresa said, we

will be judged by how well we have loved. Not only are we called to take responsibility for our actions, we are also called to recognize the consequences of our inaction. In the parable the keepers of the vineyard are condemned for not producing fruit.

We are called to lead others to God, particularly within our own families. This is put concisely in the recent Sanctus Real song, Lead Me. In the song, the father of the family accuses himself of chasing dreams, chasing things he could give up, while his wife and family are asking him, "What about us?" The father calls upon God to help him fight against anything that keeps him from giving his best to his family. That is what we all need to do. We need to ask God to help us fight against anything that is keeping us from giving our best to His people. He has entrusted His vineyard, His Kingdom to us. We need to produce. But we cannot do this alone. Nor do we have to. God is present with His Grace to help us fight off the temptations to push Him aside. We receive communion weekly for the strength to care for His vineyard. Actions have consequences.

This is not restricted to the negative. Good actions have good consequences. In the conclusion of the parable, those who made the best use of the talents that God has given them hear, "Well done, good and faithful servants, enter into the joy of your master." He will say that to us also if we live in a way determined to bear fruit for the Kingdom.

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