

27th Sunday Ordinary Time

8 October 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Reading:

Isaiah 5.1-7, Matthew 21.33-43

It's that time of year again. The first Sunday of university term, our parish and city filled with thousands of new faces, and the atmosphere alive with hope, enthusiasm, anxiety and hangovers. Every year at this time I try to put myself in the shoes of someone entering our church for the first time. This year that is harder than ever, as anyone entering our church this morning would wonder where on earth everybody was. If you've found your way here, well done. But every year on this particular liturgical Sunday, I look through the printed information which we place into everybody's hand, and wince.

Each week, you will hear the choir sing something called the offertory proper. This is a scriptural sentence sung to inaugurate that part of the mass when we prepare the altar to offer bread and wine to be consecrated. If you examine your pew sheet, you'll see that this morning's proper is the notorious "Vir erat" – these texts are generally known by their beginnings in Latin, just as we call our canticles Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis and so on. The "vir erat" – there was a man – tells us all about the suffering of Job, in painful detail. And if you are new to Oxford, or new to our church, or new to the Christian faith, you are unlikely to be enormously enthused by a text which ends with the words "and he smote his flesh with sore boils", however beautifully sung.

Liturgists love the "vir erat", just because it seems to make so little sense, and since liturgists

generally make little sense themselves, they feel at home with it. Whilst the historical reasons for using this nugget of Job are hard to fathom, we're told these days that it's because the theme of this Sunday is faith and obedience, and the story of Job is a story of the maintaining faith in the face of both terrible suffering. In fact it's faith in the face of terrible suffering and terrible theology, for not only does Job have to put up with all the ills sent upon him as a test, he also has to endure the pompous windbags ironically known as his comforters who give facile and simplistic answers to his anguished, existential questions.

In our gospel reading, faith and obedience are tested and taught through the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. As is true of the Book of Job, this parable has at its heart the question of creation, of who it is who is in charge, of what belongs to whom. The vineyard clearly belongs to

its owner, we might think. But of course the tenants behave as if that's not the case, and that refusal is nothing less than a refusal to acknowledge God.

In Biblical discussion, talk of the vineyard is always talk of Israel itself. In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah uses the image to speak to his fellow countrymen about God's care for his own people, the effort of love which constitutes his attitude to his chosen. Rather than acknowledge their blessing, the people had gone their own way and hence the vineyard, in the image, becomes unfruitful, yielding not what it should, but the wild grapes which are literally in the Hebrew, called "stinkers." The prophet is explicit in his identification of the vineyard: it is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are that which the Lord has planted. Using a similarity of sound to make his point, the prophet tells us that the Lord

looked for justice – mispat – but found bloodshed –
mispah, for righteousness – sedaqa – but found a
cry - sa-aqa.

Like Isaiah's song, Jesus' parable is addressed to those who are supposed to be the stewards and the leaders of the nation. The vineyard is Israel, the fruit is that which is owed to God: faithfulness, and obedience to his commands of love. Those entrusted with the vineyard fail spectacularly, violently expelling any who come seeking the offering which is due, finally attacking and killing the heir in the bizarre hope of getting their hands on the vineyard itself, presumably thinking that so dramatic an act of violence will deter any other legal claimants.

As always, the details of the parables are significant. Like the Lord in Isaiah's song, the

householder makes extensive provision for his vineyard. Not only does he plant it, he sets a hedge around it, and digs a wine press in it, and builds a tower, before he lets it out to tenants. He does everything needful to protect the vineyard. He surrounds it with a barrier and sets up watchtowers so that it is completely secure from attack. The tenants have nothing to worry about. They are protected from all outsiders. They are left with nothing to fear, except themselves.

And there lies the problem. Outsiders can't get in. Only those who ought to be there, the messengers of the owner, and eventually his son, pass through those extensive defences. These are not people to be feared, they are not outsiders, because they represent the very one who built the vineyard. They are closer to the inside than the tenants themselves. But the tenants, thinking that they are in control, make the most dangerous of all

mistakes. They see the ones who come from the owner, from the creator, as intruders. They see the things of God not as part of their own existence, not as the requirement for their very creation, but as outsiders, as enemies, as threats. Thinking themselves to be in charge, the thought of God's blessing, of honouring what is true, of living in an appropriate relationship with the one who is the source of all good, becomes to them a danger to be opposed, a violent opposition which needs to be overcome.

These tenants are, of course, us. Not just because they fail to acknowledge God and render that which they owe but, more worryingly, because they do not understand that God is not an outsider. God does not stand in opposition to us, to overcome and defeat us as one identity or affiliation might oppose another. God does not create us as independent of him or of each other, as

autonomous creatures who then might choose to enter into relationship or to do good things. God creates us and sustains us as creatures always and entirely dependent upon his love for everything which we claim to be true. God is not on the outside of us, a visitor from afar who can be beaten, cast out or put to death.

Of course, we think the opposite. We always have. Matthew places this story where he does precisely so we will make the necessary connection between the death of the vineyard owner's son and the fate of Jesus Christ. But reflect on one last thing. Not being an outsider, knowing and loving his people from within, God is all too aware of their desire to reject and rebel. Their misunderstanding of the whole order of things means that they will never appreciate the wine they might produce for the blessing it is, and the vineyard will be unable to do what it is designed to do – to provide the drink

which will give life and sustenance to his people. But God knows us better than we know ourselves. Christ tells a story of Israel's failure to produce the wine of true life. And just a few days after telling this story, Christ will right that wrong, will himself provide the wine, the wine with which you and I are sustained for eternal life in the miracle we call the eucharist.