

Readings Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, 4th October 2020

Collect

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Isa. 1:1-17

5 Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

2 He dug it and cleared it of stones,

and planted it with choice vines;

he built a watchtower in the midst of it,

and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes,

but it yielded wild grapes.

3. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem

and people of Judah,

judge between me

and my vineyard.

4 What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

5 And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;

I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

6 I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;

I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;

he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

Phil.3:4b-14

Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,^[a] the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ^[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;^[c] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved,^[d] I do not consider that I have made it my own;^[e] but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly^[f] call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matt.21:33-end

³³ “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹ They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;^[g]
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’?

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.^[h] ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”^[i]

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Sermon by Mike Turner (Reader)

When preparing a sermon I use a number of sources to provide hints or pointers relating to the readings for the day. Not too long ago, One source suggested that if a film was being made of today's readings, a good title for the film might be 'The Vineyard Massacre' or perhaps 'Crushed', or 'The Final Vintage'. Unfortunately (or fortunately) there hasn't been time to make a film - so you'll just have to listen to my thoughts about this story.

There are times when looking at the readings set for not just the coming Sunday but for each day - and particularly where the passage laid out is well known or seems pretty well self evident in what it is saying - that my thoughts are, 'What new message can I take from it, and what new point can I make with it?'

My initial read-through of the readings selected for today was one of those times.

In the extract from St Matthew's gospel we heard one of a series of three parables in this chapter, each of which must have really put the noses of the chief priests and the Pharisees out of joint - or even more out of joint than they already were!

For as it says at the end of the passage, they knew he was talking about them. It's clearly shown in the words of this parable; the owner, the vineyard, the workers, the messengers - all these relate to the story of the Jewish nation. It tells of how they had been brought into that fertile land, how they had been lavished with loving care by the owner (no expense was spared), and how they were given careful instructions on the cultivation of the vineyard. The owner had then left these apparently happy, industrious and faithful tenants to enjoy the fruits of his and their labours in return for a share of the harvest. But as we know, they were far from industrious and faithful - and often far from happy. From time to time one of the owners emissaries came to bring hints and directions about the care and cultivation of the vineyard, and to take the owner the agreed share of the harvest - but many of them had been beaten and sent packing, some had even been killed.

These self proclaimed experts in the history and laws of the nation would have readily recognised the story of the vineyard as they listened to Jesus story. No doubt the verses we heard from Isaiah would have been recalled. There were

no tenants in this account, but we heard how from the choicest vines the expected harvest had failed to materialise - with the result that the owner had given up on this venture and decided to remove all traces of it. Isaiah had even gone so far as to point to who was referred to in his message.

But of course the parable's tale of woe referred to previous generations - the people had learnt their lesson and had changed their ways - now they followed the owner's rules to the letter.

So just why was this upstart itinerant preacher raking all this up again? And why was he adding insult to injury by suggesting that he was the key stone that would hold everything together, when everyone knew that Israel was the key stone.

We know, and no doubt they did in their hearts, that nothing much had changed in their history. Hadn't the last messenger been disposed of not long before?

And while at the time they might not have known who the new tenants of the vineyard were going to be, by the time that Matthew's gospel was being written and read, the transition was in full flow - the new tenants from among Jews and Gentiles were moving in.

You and I are heirs to that takeover; not simply as descendants of those first new tenants, but through the grace of God as we follow his Son.

However, here we must tread carefully, for aren't we tenants of more than one beautiful vineyard? Doesn't this story present a picture not only of the Christian faith, but of our physical world as well?

We are tenants of this wonderful world, made by the same landowner for us to experience and enjoy, and entrusted with it's care and management. But just like the tenants in the story, we ignore the messengers that appear from time to time; we don't give the owner his share of the harvest but regard it as all our own work and profit. Yet if we look around we are fast reducing it in many areas to that wasteland where not even the briars and thorns that Isaiah later refers to will grow - and time and time again we are killing the owners son while professing to love and follow him.

Surely the message today is that we need to take both these readings so much more to heart; for if we don't, how long will it be before our tenancy in both vineyards is revoked?