

This Sunday's Readings – the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings are as follows:

- Isaiah 5:1-7
- Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20
- Philippians 4:6-9
- Matthew 21:33-43

This is a very unique situation as both readings have the same story – the parable of the vineyard.

The first reading is from Isaiah (1st Isaiah – 742 BC to 735 BC). At this time in Jewish history, the monarchy is still divided into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The Kingdom of Assyria was the predominant foreign power, who was pressuring the northern kingdom. Isaiah prophesies that a king will arise in the south, who will reunite the divided monarchy and defeat Assyria. However the people must change, which leads to this story about the vineyard. The vineyard represents the House of Israel and the landowner represents Yahweh. In this story, the landowner has done everything conceivable for his vineyard so that it will produce good fruit (Yahweh did everything for the people of Israel). However, wild (bitter) grapes resulted (the people were unfaithful to Yahweh). The landowner then destroyed the vineyard (Yahweh punished the Israelites). However it is not as simple as that. Fr. Roger Karban in his weekly syndicated column states – “In the Hebrew Scriptures, "judgment" and "justice" always refer to relationships: ties with Yahweh and one another. Against this background, Isaiah reminds his people that, in place of relationships, Yahweh finds only bloodshed and outcries. Before anything else, our God checks on how well we're fulfilling our social responsibilities “. The people did not change and the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this additional comment on this first reading – “The song of the vineyard, it is thought, was composed by the prophet Isaiah during the early part of his ministry and was sung at vintage festivals. Only the last stanza equates the vineyard allegorically with Israel, thus turning a happy little song about country life into an expression of God's judgment upon his people. This represents a clever turn on the part of the singer, who has engaged the attention and approval of his hearers up to this point. The parables of Jesus are clearly in the same tradition. Why this reading was chosen for today is obvious (see the gospel)”.

We see almost the exact same story in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. For this parable, Matthew referenced the Gospel of Mark and also the sayings Gospel of Thomas. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the origin of this parable – “In Matthew (and Mark, the source Matthew follows here), the parable of the vineyard is heavily allegorized. Luke and the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas contain traces of an earlier form of this parable that is shorter and less allegorized. In this earlier form, there are no echoes of Isa 5 in the opening of the parable (v. 33). The emissaries prior to the son are reduced to two or three single ones, without any suggestion that they are identified with the Old Testament prophets. The Christological upgrading of the son is missing, and the parable

must have concluded with his murder”. Also, this episode takes place only a couple of days before Jesus’ death on the cross. The story is almost exactly the same as Isaiah but with a twist. The vineyard (the Kingdom of Heaven) is planted and left to tenants (the Israelites – the chosen people) to tend the vineyard. At the time of harvest, the landowner (God) sends some of his servants (the prophets) to collect the harvest. The tenants abuse them just as the house of Israel rejected the prophets. Finally, he sends his only son (Jesus) who the tenants (Israelites) kill. In Jewish law, if the landowner dies without an heir, his land is disbursed to the tenants. The landowner will severely punish these tenants and lease his land to new tenants “who will give him the produce at the proper times”. These new tenants are the Gentiles. Jesus was “the stone that the builders rejected”. The chief priests and elders also heard this parable and knew that Jesus was talking about them. However, they could do nothing at that time because of fear of the people. In conclusion, Fr. Roger Karban states – “it’s clear that we cease being either God’s vineyard or the tenants of God’s vineyard when we cease relating to others as God relates. When regulations replace a relating faith, reform is necessary. As Jesus reminds us, if we don’t reform, we could be replaced”! Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on today’s Gospel reading – “It was all too easy for the Church to allegorize this parable. The vineyard became Israel; the vinedressers, its religious leaders; the successive emissaries, the Old Testament prophets; the son, Jesus the Messiah; his murder, the crucifixion. This interpretation was then clinched by combining with it the testimonium from Ps 118:22, so that the parable closes with Jesus’ resurrection. Matthew goes further and adds verse 43, so that it closes with the prediction of the mission to the Gentiles following Israel’s rejection of the gospel. All this is not wrong; it is simply the constant reapplication of the parable to new situations in the community’s life”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds this comment on today’s Gospel reading – “Today’s parable offers an opportunity to appreciate the complexity of the gospel tradition. Matthew’s version of the parable contains elements that are difficult to attribute to Jesus: allusions to the Greek Bible (vv. 33, 42), allegorical features (the vineyard is Israel, the tenant farmers are Israel’s leaders, the householder is God, etc.), and others. The version of this parable in the Coptic (= the Egyptian tradition) *Gospel of Thomas* 65 (dating from the beginning of the third century) doesn’t contain allegorical elements and may be closer to the parable Jesus originally spoke. In this simpler form, the parable reflects a reality familiar to all peasants, namely, the extortion practiced by hard-nosed absentee landowners.

A SIMPLE PARABLE

The vineyard owner lives in a different country (v. 33). This was a common experience among peasants in Galilee. The owner rented the vineyard out to tenant farmers or sharecroppers who worked the land in return for a fee or a percentage of the crop. The owner sent his agents on a regular basis to collect what was due. Modern scholars have pieced together bits and pieces of information to gain a better understanding of the situation of tenant farmers based on what is known about peasant free-holders, that is, peasants who were fortunate enough to own and farm their own land. Some of the crop would have to

be used for trade to gain other necessities of life. There were also social dues (gifts), religious tithes, and taxes adding up to about 35 or 40 percent. About 20 percent of the annual produce would be left to feed the family and livestock of a free-holding peasant. Far less would be left to tenant farmers who also owed land rent. From this perspective, the parable is easy to interpret. The tenant farmers are frustrated, desperate, and driven to violence. They beat and kill the first two delegations from the owner. When the owner's son shows up, they miscalculate and presume that the owner is dead. Believing the son to be the sole surviving heir, they kill him in hope of gaining the vineyard for themselves. The plan is stupid and illegal, but they are driven by their otherwise hopeless situation. The owner is very much alive. Everyone knows what his response will be. He will avenge himself against these foolish tenant farmers and lease to more compliant tenants. The owner will not be deprived or defrauded of his harvest. If this was the form of the parable Jesus told, it was a warning to landowners against selfishly hoarding their harvest or exporting it.

AN ALLEGORIZED PARABLE

In general, a parable makes one point. The story is about an absentee landlord and his tenant farmers. In an allegory, every element of the story means something else. Good storytellers don't explain their stories (or jokes). The point is clear. When a story or parable is interpreted, inevitably the meaning is not what appears on the surface. In verse 43 Jesus (or the preachers, or Matthew) appears to make an allegory out of the parable, perhaps on the basis of Isaiah 5:1-7. But note carefully the differences between Matthew and Isaiah. There are no tenant farmers in Isaiah; God destroyed the vineyard itself. Clearly in Matthew the problem lies with the leadership of Israel and not with Israel itself as in Isaiah (5:5-6). The tenant farmers, that is, the leadership, must be replaced because they have not born fruit (see Matt 3:8, 10; 7:16-20; 12:33; 13:8; 21:19). Thus, leadership will be transferred from the present group which has failed to a different group (preferable to the word "people" in v. 43) that will produce proper fruit. This group is best identified as the leaders of the Judean-Christian community".

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team