

**Twenty-Seventh
Sunday
in Ordinary
Time**

Year A



FIRST READING
Isaiah 5:1-7

PSALM
Psalm 80:9, 12-16, 19-20

SECOND READING
Philippians 4:6-9

GOSPEL
Matthew 21:33-43

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PRAYER

Psalm 80:9, 12-16, 19-20

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations
and planted it.
it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.
Why then have you
broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way
pluck its fruit?
The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field
feed on it.
Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock
that your right hand planted.
Then we will never
turn back from you;
give us life,
and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine,
that we may be saved.

**READING
THE WORD**

First Reading
Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his
vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.
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.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusa-
lem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
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?
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.
I will make it a waste; it shall not
be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with
briers and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
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!

Second Reading
Philippians 4:6-9

Do not worry about anything,
but in everything by prayer and

supplication with thankgiving
let your requests be made
known to God. And the peace of
God, which surpasses all under-
standing, will guard your hearts
and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Finally, beloved, whatever is
true, whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is
pure, whatever is pleasing, what-
ever is commendable, if there is
any excellence and if there is
anything worthy of praise, think
about these things. Keep on
doing the things that you have
learned and received and heard
and seen in me, and the God of
peace will be with you.

Gospel
Matthew 21:33-43

Jesus said, "Listen to another
parable. There was a landown-
er 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. When
the harvest time had come, he
sent his slaves to the tenants to
collect his produce. But the ten-
ants seized his slaves and beat
one, killed another, and stoned
another. Again he sent other
slaves, more than the first; and
they treated them in the same
way. Finally he sent his son to
them, saying, 'They will respect
my son.' But when the tenants

saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 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."

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

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes?'

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.

HEARING THE WORD

"The Sour Grapes"

Today's liturgy, with its extensive use of the imagery of the vineyard, invites reflection on what might lead a person to a life that contravenes God's ways and purposes.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks on behalf of God, whom he calls "his beloved". Using poetic language, he presents God as a vineyard owner who has gone to great lengths to develop and care for his vineyard, which represents the people of Israel living in two separate kingdoms - the Northern Kingdom called Israel, and the Southern Kingdom called Judah. Justly, God expected that those who had been so

lovingly selected, planted, protected and cared for would produce good fruit. Yet, they yielded only what the prophet calls "wild grapes" or, in some translations of the Bible, "sour grapes". The prophet then invites the people to judge between the vineyard owner, God, and his vineyard. The judgement was obvious - the useless vineyard no longer deserved its owner's attentions and should be left unattended and unprotected.

Isaiah pronounced this oracle when the Israelites in both kingdoms were living through a time of economic and political stability. However, these favorable circumstances benefited mostly the wealthy and the powerful. The ruling elites took full advantage of the circumstances, living opulent and wasteful lifestyles combined with the progressive corruption of morals and exploitation of the farmers and workers. Looking at this situation, the prophet warns that the corrupt nation, like an unproductive vineyard, would soon be exposed to its enemies. We know from history that this prophecy indeed came true, as in a few decades the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were both overrun and conquered by the Assyrians and entered into a long period of subjugation, impoverishment, and foreign domination. The unethical and excessive lifestyle of the elites brought disaster upon the entire nation because the leaders and many ordinary people, while enjoying the benefits of the well-kept

"vineyard", produced only sour grapes of unrighteousness and injustice. In the first reading, therefore, the "wild" or "sour" are a result of the shortsighted self-centeredness which stops a person from using the benefits given to him or her for the advantage of the broader community.

The second reading comes from the concluding section of the letter to the Philippians where Paul issues a number of specific instructions regarding community life. In the passage read today, he makes two specific recommendations regarding good and harmonious relationships, which he refers to as "peace". First, he focuses on peace with God (vv 6-7). He recommends rejoicing, prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving as a way to experience the peace that comes from God leading to tranquility in one's heart. Paul knows fully well that problems and deficiencies experienced daily may easily lead a person into a state of perpetual dissatisfaction and bitterness towards everybody, including God. This results in constant grumbling, frustration and anger. These are the "sour grapes" which pollute the human heart and make peaceful relationship with God impossible. By recommending the attitude of prayerful thankfulness, Paul aims to prevent such bitterness from arising in the hearts of his faithful.

Second, Paul makes a similar appeal with regard to peace with one another (vv 8-9). What is true about

the relationship with God is also true about the relationship to others. Speaking positively, Paul admonishes the Philippians to seek what is honorable, pure, pleasing, and commendable. In other words, a Christian acts in a manner that builds relationship. Instead of focusing on the imperfections of others, on what is negative and disruptive, a Christian should pay attention to what is positive and beneficial. Such focus will prevent bitterness and sour moods from disrupting the community.

In the Gospel reading Matthew, like Isaiah, uses the image of the vineyard to continue with the stinging critique of the Jewish leadership. This time, he uses the story of workers to whom the landowner entrusted his vineyard. Just like in Isaiah, the landowner himself developed and secured the vineyard, and subsequently leased it to some farmers. Yet, the very farmers who benefited from the owner's work, chose to keep the entire produce for themselves and even killed the landowner's servants. Eventually, intending to seize the vineyard for themselves, they even killed the owner's son.

Once again, like in the passage from Isaiah, those about whom this parable was told were called to pass judgment. And again, the judgment was obvious – the wicked tenants should be punished severely, and the vineyard should be taken away from them and entrusted to others. Hearing this correct judgment, Jesus proceeded to make the

Jewish leaders aware that he was talking about them and about their rejection of himself as the rightful leader of the people of God. In their rejection of Jesus, they mishandled the authority given to them and opposed God's purpose of making Jesus the "cornerstone" upon which the new people of God were to be built. Through this rejection, the Israelite leaders produced "sour grapes" of jealousy and violence in an attempt to keep the power and privilege which they enjoyed. In doing so, they became murderous villains. According to Jesus, God's vineyard belongs to those who "produce the fruit of the kingdom of God". This fruit is nothing else but the acceptance of Jesus as God's Messiah and living in conformity with his example and teaching.

Rejection or acceptance of God's ways is often a matter of an unconscious response to various situations and circumstances of life. The people at the time of Isaiah, particularly the ruling class, slid into the life of exploitation and unrighteousness perhaps even without realizing it. The well-being they were experiencing, blinded them to the wrongfulness of their ways and led them to produce "the sour grapes". Paul fully realized that confronting the difficulties of daily life might produce discouragement and bitterness that can pollute the human heart. To counteract this, he admonished his faithful to live in the spirit of thankful recognition of God's grace, with a careful focus on what is positive and good in life and in others. This would

prevent slipping into bitterness and constant dissatisfaction which poison relationships and destroy peace. Jesus analyzed the behavior of those who rejected him showing that it was their self-concern and unhealthy ambitions that blinded them. As a result, they became the wicked tenants producing the evil fruits of their unhealthy ambitions. Through these examples, the liturgy of today invites reflection on how to avoid becoming a vineyard that produces "sour grapes" or wicked vineyard workers. Christians must carefully consider their motivations and ambitions and, should they see that the fruit of their life is "sour", must pray for the restoration of their integrity using the words of the psalmist "restore us, O Lord, God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The theme for our reflection today is very interesting in that it raises the question: "what indeed can make us go against God's ways or commands?" God, in his infinite mercy and love, cares, guides and protects us throughout our lives. But then, God also expects a fitting response to his gifts, and that response is to produce good fruits in life. Yet, so often and so surprisingly we respond by producing "sour grapes".

As we have seen in the first reading, the people of Israel were flourishing politically and economically. However,

it was only the rich who benefitted from this prosperity. The rich became richer and the poor were getting even poorer. This was because the rich were exploiting the poor. This is very much like our African society today. God has indeed blessed us with rich human and natural resources but who are the beneficiaries of these resources? Of course it is the elites in our society, to the point that one wonders if these resources are truly a blessing from God or a curse. This is due to the fact that our leaders do not look at the common good of all. In this, they are producing sour grapes in the form of looting public funds, corruption and gross mismanagement. The resulting chaos leads to wars, terrorism and economic migration. Thus the joy of living and being a youth in our land eludes us, and yet, we are the future leaders of this great continent. As Christians we need to be very attentive when we are doing well, because we can forget about the source of our prosperity and begin to produce sour grapes that will nourish no one.

St Paul, in the second reading, reminds us of the need to be optimistic and thankful, even in the midst of such difficult situations as described above. He reminds us of two very important things. First, we need to develop a good and harmonious relationship with God, which he calls peace. We can do this by prayer, supplication and gratitude. If we develop these attitudes, then we can expe-

rience serenity. The crises in our society can make us reject God's ways because we feel bitterness or anger towards God for not acting. In the extreme, this makes youth join terrorist groups or take to substance abuse. Such acts will surely yield sour grapes. Paul knew full well that the difficulties we experience in life can make us grow cold and bitter towards God. So he urged his faithful to be thankful. In the same way, if we remain open and thankful to God even in the midst of crises, we can prevent bitterness from overtaking us. A Tiv (Nigerian) proverb says: "God gives nothing to those who keep their arms crossed." This means that it is within our capacity to avoid producing the bitter fruits, no matter what we face in life.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is meant specifically for those who produce good fruits. This entails accepting Jesus and following his example and teachings. His words are the sure way to becoming a vineyard that produces the sweet and desirable fruit that can make the world rejoice.

PROVERB

"God gives nothing to those who keep their arms crossed."

ACTION

Self-examination:

For who or what have I said "thank you" to God since the beginning of this day? What are the good grapes that I have within me as a follower of Jesus and which are the sour grapes that I need to get rid of?

Response to God:

As a Christian today, I am reminded to be always thankful to God in every situation. I will learn to always count my blessings by looking at the positive side of life.

Response to your World:

Write or call your parents or friends who have done something good to you, and that you forgot to thank them for.

As a group, let each person take a paper and pen and write down the blessings that they have received from God for which they have forgotten to thank him. Afterwards all should offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God

PRAYER

Thank you God our Father for all the blessings and graces that you have bestowed on us. We are sorry for the moments when we have failed to say thank you. Help us in our daily activities to always remember to give thanks to you, for all that we are and have come from you. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen