

TWENTY-SEVENTH
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



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

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 Jerusalem 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 briars 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!

Philippians 4:6–9

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

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, 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, whatever 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.

Matthew 21:33–43

Jesus said, “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. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

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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

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, using the imagery of the vineyard, invites reflection on what might lead a person or a nation to a life that contravenes God's ways and purposes.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks on behalf of God, whom Isaiah 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 he had chosen, planted, protected and lovingly cared for would produce good fruit. Yet, they yielded only what the prophet calls "wild" or "sour grapes". The prophet then invites the people to judge between the vineyard owner, God, and his vineyard. The judgement is obvious – the useless vineyard no longer deserves 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.

History showed this prophecy came true, as few decades later 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 "sour grapes" are a result of the shortsighted self-centeredness which prevents 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, the apostle makes two specific recommendations regarding good and harmonious relationships, which he refers to as "peace". First, he focuses on peace with God. He recommends rejoicing, prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving as a way to experience peace that comes from God and leads to tranquillity 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. 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 should act in a manner that builds relationships. 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, employs the image of the vineyard to continue with his 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 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, as 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 a life of exploitation and unrighteousness, perhaps even without realising 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 realised 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 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 ben-

effitted from this prosperity. The rich became richer and the poor were sliding into ever deeper poverty. A similar pattern can be seen in many societies 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 societies, 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 many 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 experience 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 become 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

Am I a grateful person? For what or to whom have I said "thank you" since the beginning of this day?

What are the good grapes that I produce 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

I will write or call my parents or friends who have done something good to me, for which I never expressed gratitude.

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 remember to give thanks always to you, for all that we are, and have, comes from you. We ask this through Christ our Lord Amen.