

27th Sunday A Mary Mags

Isaiah 5:1-7, Matthew 21:33-43

Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur - change the name, and the story is told about you. These words are directed by Horace at the man who laughs the myth of Tantalus, unable to drink from the stream which ebbs just out of his reach. The man is a miser, and if he won't touch his money, he might as well not have it. *De te fabula narratur* – the story is told about you. Though the language is wrong, this could easily be a refrain in the gospels, as this morning's parable makes clear.

It is appropriate that, as we celebrate our harvest festival, we hear again two parallel passages of scripture - the song of the vineyard in Isaiah, the parable of the tenants in Matthew. They are concerned with the process of producing fruit, of preparing the ground, planting the seed, nurturing the plant, harvesting the crop. They invite us to ask what it means to harvest God's crop, to be the workers in the Lord's own vineyard.

The vine is one of the most ancient images of the nation of Israel. Isaiah's little song dates perhaps as early as the eighth century before the birth of Christ. It summarises a central theme of early prophetic teaching: the Lord has chosen Israel, picked her out from among the

nations for his special favour, led her out of bondage into the promised land and set up a line of chosen rulers to guide her in his own ways. But much has gone wrong. As far as the prophets are concerned, the fact that much has gone wrong is evident simply from the fact that in Isaiah's time the Assyrian Empire now threatens to conquer this chosen land. The Lord must somehow and for some reason be withholding his favour.

Jesus's parable is a deliberate echo of Isaiah's words, an echo which would have struck a chord familiar to every one of his hearers, familiar also to the community for which Matthew wrote his gospel. The vine had become not just a favourite image but the representation which dominated Israel's understanding of itself in the time of Jesus. Matthew was writing shortly after the destruction of the great temple of Jerusalem, built by the notorious Herod. Listen to some words about that temple from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who chronicled, among other things, the war which led to the temple's demise:

The temple had doors at the entrance, and lintels over them, of the same height as the temple itself. They were adorned with embroidered veils, with their flowers of purple, and pillars interwoven: and over these, but under the crown-work, was spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the largeness and fine workmanship of which was a astonishing sight for the vastness of the materials and the great skill of the artisans.

The temple itself, above its very gates, bore the metaphor: the vine is Israel, God's own people. When in John's gospel Jesus says "I am the true vine", he is saying something quite extraordinary: I am the true Israel, the chosen vehicle of God's salvation of the world, I am the temple in which the presence of God dwells amongst his people. Here in Matthew, this threefold imagery - vine as Israel, vine as temple, Israel as temple, is developed further. The wicked tenants in the parable seek to own the land with which they have been entrusted, they seek to cast out the owner by killing his heir and claiming what is rightfully his for themselves. Looking elsewhere in the Old Testament - to Psalm 118 as we know it - Jesus warns his hearers that the thing which was cast out and thought destroyed has become not just a part of God's new creation, but the very centrepiece of it. The use of the building imagery - the stone has become the head of the corner - takes us swiftly into the language of structure and edifice: for Matthew's hearers, the ghost of the temple, burnt perhaps only five or ten years earlier, would be haunting and disturbing them still.

And here, perhaps, is the real genius of this parable. For by recalling Isaiah, and conjuring images of the temple, Jesus is deliberately both focusing and deflecting his hearers' attention. Focusing it by reminding them of familiar texts and images, and deflecting it so that those other things - the scriptures, the temple - deceive them into failing to

recognise the story's true import. This becomes clear at the end of the tale. The landowner has dug and prepared his vineyard, but his tenants have refused to render its fruit; they have maltreated his servants and finally, most shamefully of all, have killed his son. Having drawn the audience - the chief priests and elders - into the web of his story Jesus now traps them with a question: what will the owner of the vineyard do? They give the obvious answer - he will come and destroy those wretches - and in so doing they heap condemnation on their own heads. For the story is not about others, it is about them. *De te fabula narratur.*

The displacement, the deflection of those hearing the story, is just as real for us. It is easy to admire the power of the gospel narratives without perceiving their effects. If we look from a distance and do not recognise our own involvement then we are trapped like the chief priests and the Pharisees. Just as we are those who are hearing the story, so are we also those about whom the story is told. Entrusted with nurturing and caring for God's vineyard, we are reluctant to yield up our due, protective of our own little corner as if it belonged to us rather than to its creator, nervous about engaging with the strangers who require us to offer something up, jealous of those who seem to have more than ourselves, concerned to make as much as we can as individuals without thinking through the implications and effects of what we produce. I hardly need

observe that this parable speaks to us very directly in our current economic crisis.

But it also speaks to us individually, because it reminds us that creation is the gift of God to be made fruitful and to be enjoyed. Wine is a good thing, the product of the vineyard is a source of joy not a cause of guilt. But we are guilty if we fail to recognise that a vineyard will be made fruitful by people working together. We are guilty if we fail to acknowledge that the fruits of the vineyard are to be used in accordance with the will of the one who put us there, to be offered for the needy, for the hungry, for the homeless, for the stranger.

The fruits of the vineyard, properly offered, are the blessing of the one who owns it, the one whose creative love gives life to all things, all things including you and me. The life of Christ is the fruit of the vine which we offer every time we celebrate the sacrament of his body and blood. As the tenants of God's vineyard we are called to be united with the Son whom he sends, to join our offering with his so that all people – not just our fortunate selves – are nourished by the harvest of the world, so that all the fruits of creation are directed towards the will of their creator. The story is all too clear. The story is all about us.