

Sunday 8 October 2017

Proper 27A (Thanksgiving Sunday)

How to be a Vineyard

My father wasn't a gardener in general, but he loved roses. He gave my mother red roses on their first date and she gave him red roses at his burial. And he painstakingly created in our backyard two small rose beds, despite the fact that the South Texas soil was very unsuitable. He dug them and took out stones; added and dug in topsoil. He bought a gadget that fitted over the garden hose so he could give the rose bushes a special food that dissolved in the water. He tended them lovingly day by day and they rewarded him with beautiful roses: red, white, pink, and a sort of delicate orange.

As a young child I was fascinated with it all but one day I killed half or more of his rose bushes. All I did, as I remember saying to him, was water them. The trouble was, I kept on watering them. I filled the flower bed with water and kept on pouring it in. To this day I don't recall what I thought I was doing or what I meant to do, except I am quite sure it wasn't what happened. I don't remember now exactly what my father said to me. I do remember I wasn't punished except by being forbidden to come near the surviving roses or indeed to water any plant or tree without supervision.

Unlike the beloved vine-grower in our reading my father wasn't angry with me, because he knew in his heart that I really hadn't meant to do any harm. I just didn't know

what I was doing. In the reading from Isaiah on the other hand the people symbolised by the vineyard are not small children and they know what they are doing and not doing. They are failing to do justice as the Lord requires. So in the end they are symbolised not just by any vineyard, but by one in which wild grapes, bitter and small, grow, rather than their cultivated cousins, from which wine could be made. Like the grapes in the beloved's vineyard, the people have reverted to what they were before they were cultivated by YHWH. So the vineyard was to be abandoned and left untended.

Isaiah's story is a warning of what happens to God's people when they fail to do God's work, which is justice and righteousness. Like all powerful sermon stories it has the strength of simplicity. The people have turned away from the Lord so the Lord is prepared to turn away from them. Shape up or ship out! You have been warned, as the danger signs used to read. Jesus' story, told shortly after his entry into Jerusalem during his final Passover week, is part of a series of parables directed primarily at the leadership, the chief priests and elders of the people (we heard another one of them last Sunday). It's a bit more complicated.

It also has a more complicated cast of characters than Isaiah's story. Now there is no beloved vinegrower, but a landowner who lets his bijou vineyard out to tenants. These are possibly the worst tenants in the history of rental property! They make those occasional columns in the Toronto Star about the tenants from Hell seem mild. They refuse to pay the rent (a share of the produce). They mistreat and kill the rent-collectors. When the landowner sends his son to settle matters they come up with a cockamamie plot to steal his inheritance by killing him. And Jesus adds in a mention of the stone that the builders rejected from Ps 118.22-3.

Now the vineyard stands not for God's people, but for God's kingdom, God's reign and realm, a subtle distinction. For the kingdom of God is in us, but not exactly identical to us. The landowner, God, gave the tenants, the leaders of the people, responsibility to cultivate

the vineyard and pay part of the produce as rent. But they refuse to give God God's proper due, they neglect and mistreat God's servants, the prophets. In the end they kill the landowner's son, Jesus. Just to make things a bit more complicated, the rejected stone that has become the cornerstone also represents Jesus and the leadership are also represented by the ones who fall on the stone and are broken.

The chief priests and Pharisees take the point of this story, and the one before it, as aimed at them. And they are right. Jesus is saying that because the leaders have failed spectacularly the vineyard no longer produces the fruit of the kingdom, for else there would be no point in taking the vineyard away from them and giving it to "a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom". But there is also a point here for us, as God's New Covenant people. The grapes in Isaiah's vineyard regressed to their wild cousins and became sour and small, unsuited to make wine. If we are not to become another unprofitable vineyard like the one in Jesus' parable, we must produce the fruits of the kingdom.

What are they? According to Isaiah the beloved's vineyard ought to yield the fruit of justice and righteousness:

"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!

What should the vineyard in Jesus' parable of the bad tenants yield? What are the fruits of the kingdom? Clearly we would not go wrong if we answered "justice and righteousness", for Jesus is drawing on Isaiah's story in shaping his own.

A hymn from the Taizé community that we often sing reminds us that "the kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit". In Galatians 5.22-3 St Paul reminds us

that the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”. Are these also the fruits of the kingdom that we should produce?

That would certainly represent a transformation of our original selves, our pre-Jesus personalities, at least in most cases. Mine, for one! In Isaiah the people are supposed to be cultivated grapes, not wild ones, but they have slipped back into their original, unusable, form. In Matthew the vineyard, God’s kingdom here on earth, is supposed to produce the fruits of the kingdom, in contrast to the fruits of the wicked tenants. So a transformation, indeed a permanent change, is called for, to make it possible for us to do so.

Perhaps that is why the reading from Philippians joins these two vineyard texts from Isaiah and Matthew. Certainly there does not seem to be much connection on first (or even tenth!) reading. But in this reading Paul is speaking about the transformation of his desires and ambitions. He has become a different man, one who counts the things he used to value above all as worthless in comparison to the “prize” he is striving after now. That prize is Jesus the Messiah, or to be precise, it is “the prize of the heavenly call of God in the Messiah Jesus.” Paul’s whole world has changed and he has changed with it.

If we are going to make the fundamental changes in ourselves that will be required for a makeover into cultivated wine grapes from sour wild grapes, from neglected and unyielding vines to vines that yield the fruit of the kingdom, then we need to make the same fundamental changes in ourselves, our values, and our goals that Paul did. We have to want to work for that prize with all our energy, like the hockey player who gets up before it’s light to go to the rink and work and drill so as to win the prize for her team and herself.

This sounds like a lot of work, and it is. Transforming oneself, even with God’s grace to help, is always work and it is very easy to slip backward and become wild grapes. So where is the good news for us here? It is after all Thanksgiving Sunday, and I appear to be

saying we should all go home and be thankful that we have an endless job of self-improvement to do. Well, despite appearances that's not what I am saying! The Good News here is that the work has already been done, and we have only to lay hold of it. The righteousness from God that comes by faith in Jesus the Messiah is right there before our eyes, a prize we can grasp. It will transform our selves and our lives if we are willing to let it make us over into good grapes that bear fruit for the kingdom.

Are we bearing fruit for the kingdom? What do you think? We work for our siblings in Christ through programmes like the drop-in, we feed one another with the word of God in preaching, teaching, and the sacraments. Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus says that we will know people by the fruit they bear, like fruit trees: "You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" Our fruits are all around us today. Like Paul we must recognise that we are not all the way there: Jesus has made us his own, but we have not grasped the fulness of the prize yet, we have not yet experienced the full power of Christ's resurrection in our lives.

But look at how far we have come! Like our predecessors here on the corner we have made ourselves and our community into a vineyard that yields fruit for God's kingdom, and we are not resting on our laurels (to mix the metaphor!). We are still working every day to embody the risen Lord more and more to one another and to our broken world. And that is something we can be thankful for, this Sunday and every other Sunday. Amen.