

## 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 5:1-7
<i>Response</i>	The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:6-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I have chose you from the world, says the Lord, to go and bear fruit that will remain.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 21:33-43

The 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time gives us another example of one of Jesus' many parables from the Gospel of Matthew. If you've been journeying with us in the last few months, you'll notice that we've had a number of occasions to look carefully at Matthew's parables, of the parables of Jesus. This Gospel is just full of them, and on this Sunday we are going to get one of Jesus's final parables that he tells before his passion, and his death, and his resurrection. It is one of the parables that he delivers in the context of the mounting opposition that's rising in Jerusalem in his last days before his execution. And that parable is the famous parable of the wicked tenants. So for the 27th Sunday in Year A, we are going to pick up in Matthew 21:33-43. We will read the parable and then we will try to put it in context and unpack its meaning. So in Matthew 21:33 Jesus says:

“Hear another parable. There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get his fruit; and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they did the same to them. Afterward 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 have his inheritance.' And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. When therefore 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 let out the vineyard to other tenants

who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one, it will crush him.”<sup>1</sup>

So I realize that the last verse that I just read isn't in the lectionary, but it is actually a part of the parable and I want to say something about it in just a few moments, as it does shed some light on Jesus' use of the language of the kingdom of God. But for now, I want to ask a few questions. So what is the meaning of this parable of the wicked tenants? How would it have been understood by Jesus' Jewish audience that he was speaking to in the first century? A few points here. Number one, the context, the immediate context of this parable in Matthew's Gospel is very important. If you go back to Matthew 21:23, it makes clear that Jesus pronounces the parable of the wicked tenants in the Temple in Jerusalem while he is speaking to the chief priests and the elders of the people. So the audience that he is addressing in this parable isn't like the crowds of Galilee in the Sermon on the Mount, or something like that. He is speaking directly to the Jewish priests and the Jewish elders, the leaders of the people, in the city of Jerusalem and in the Temple itself. So the context, once again, is this mounting conflict between Jesus and these Jewish leaders who are asking him questions, trying to test him, trying to entrap him, and so on and so forth. That background is important because this is one of those parables — they all are rooted in first century Judaism — but this is one of those parables where you really can't understand it unless you look at the Old Testament, unless you look at the Old Testament background. Because when Jesus draws on the metaphor of a vineyard and the vineyard owner, and the workers in the vineyard, on the one hand he is definitely appealing to something that people would've known from the agricultural life of Judaism in the first century, in which

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

wine was a stable commodity and in which there were vineyards that people worked.

People would've been familiar with the reality of a first century vineyard. But he is specifically alluding to an Old Testament prophecy, an Old Testament text about the vineyard of the Lord, as the background to his parable. If you look at his parable, he has a few key characters. He has the householder — or the owner of the vineyard, he has the vineyard itself — which is a kind of symbol for something — he has the tenants who work the vineyard, he has the servants of the master who were sent to the tenants but who are rejected by the tenants, and then finally, of course, the son. What is all of this an illusion to? In this case I think it's important to start first with the Old Testament background, which is actually from another allegory of another vineyard, namely the prophet Isaiah's allegory of the vineyard in chapter 5 of the book of Isaiah. So just turn back with me for just a moment to Isaiah 5. Jesus isn't the first person to make an allegory of a vineyard. Isaiah had done it about eight centuries before Jesus in chapter 5 of his book, which is, not surprisingly, the first reading for this Sunday. So if you look at your first reading for today, Isaiah's parable, or allegory of the vineyard, sometimes called the song of the vineyard, says this:

Let me sing for my beloved  
a love song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
He dugged 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;  
and he looked for it to yield grapes,  
but it yielded wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and men of Judah,  
judge, I pray you, between me  
and my vineyard.  
What more was there to do for my vineyard,

that I have not done in it?  
When I looked for it to yield grapes,  
why did it yield wild grapes?  
And now I will tell you...

And remember, this is the Lord speaking.

...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 briars and thorns shall grow up;  
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 men of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
and he looked for justice,  
but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness,  
but behold, a cry!

Okay, so even if you just read Jesus' parable and read Isaiah, you can already see some of the key parallels here between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Obviously Isaiah is making an allegorical comparison between the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem and this image of God as the divine owner of a vineyard and the people as its fruits. So what he is saying here is he's describing this sort of love song about the vineyard, which is really meant to describe, in a sense, Israel as the bride and the Lord as the bridegroom, the divine bridegroom. And in this allegory of Isaiah, the beloved or the vineyard owner is of course God himself. The vineyard is — this important — it's both the house of Israel, in a sense the people of Israel, but it is also the city of Jerusalem which was mentioned there in

verse three, and specifically to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. You can see that because it talks about the watchtower and it also talks about the walls being broken down. So the idea is that just as a vineyard has a tower in it, and a vineyard has walls around, so too Jerusalem, the city, has a tower and it has walls built around it. But the walls of that city and the tower in that city are going to come crumbling down.

In other words, this is a prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction and a prophecy of judgment against the leadership of Jerusalem and the inhabitants of Jerusalem who were supposed to be in this covenant relationship of love with God, but who have in fact broken that relationship and violated it through their sin. And the imagery that Isaiah uses for that is the contrast between grapes and wild grapes. So if Jerusalem is the vineyard of the Lord, it was supposed to produce grapes, which symbolized righteousness. But instead of making the fruit of righteousness for the Lord, they bear wild grapes, which would basically be grapes that were too bitter to make wine with. They were unsuitable for the production of wine. Those wild grapes are a symbol for unrighteousness. You can see this here when he talks about bloodshed in the city or the cry of the oppressed. So the wild grapes signify the wickedness and the sin and the unrighteousness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. So that Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 5.

Think about it and put yourself in the perspective of a first century Jew, and not just a first century Jew, but like a chief priest or an elder, or one of the rabbis, who knew the Scriptures and knew that Isaiah had condemned the Jerusalem of his day and its leaders because of their wickedness by drawing out this allegory of a vineyard and its bad fruit. Now Jesus comes on the scene and is in the Temple right in front of you, and he says well let me tell you another parable, and he does the exact same thing. He gives an allegory of a vineyard where the tenants of the vineyard are wicked. So in Jesus' allegory, in Jesus' parable, obviously some of the things are similar. First, the householder or the owner of the vineyard is a symbol for God, is a symbol for the Lord. Secondly, the vineyard is a symbol not just for the people of Judah, but for the leaders in Jerusalem in particular, for the city of Jerusalem. Third, and this is really critical, the tenants, who are these wicked tenants? Well in context, Jesus is throwing this in the face of the chief priests and the elders in Jerusalem. And the reason he is doing that is because he's relying on the history of Israel. Notice what God says. In the allegory, in the story, the owner

of the vineyard says “I am going to send my servants,” and one of them gets beaten, one of them gets killed, and one of them get stoned by the tenants in Jerusalem, by the leaders of the people.

What is that a reference to? Well it is a reference to the history of the prophets in Israel. So the servants here represent the prophets whom God would send to Israel whenever it had fallen into sin in order to call them to repentance. And what did the leaders, especially the priests in Jerusalem, do to the prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel? What did they do? They persecuted them. In fact, as some scholars have pointed out, you can even see here maybe specific allusions to specific prophets. So for example, when it says that one of the servants was killed, that might be a reference to Isaiah, because Isaiah was the most famous of the Old Testament prophets after Elijah, and guess how he met his end? He was sawn in two by the wicked king Manasseh. We know this from ancient Jewish tradition. They had a very ancient tradition of Isaiah being killed by King Manasseh by being cut in half, and that's how that great prophet met his end. The other image there of one of the servants being stoned, some scholars suggest, is an allusion to the prophet Jeremiah, who, if you recall, went to Jerusalem and told the chief priests and the elders that they were wicked, called them to repentance, and said if you don't repent the city is going to be destroyed 600 years before Jesus. And how were Jeremiah's prophecies received? Well they threw him in a cistern, for one thing — they tried to kill him multiple times — but eventually, according to Jewish tradition again, Jeremiah ended up in Egypt where he was stoned to death. So the imagery here of being killed, being stoned, is actual correspondence with Jewish tradition about the lives of the prophets, about the death of the prophets.

Now at this point in the parable something interesting happens. You might recall from previous videos that I've said that Jesus' parables almost always have a twist. In other words, there is something in the story that's unexpected or even seemingly irrational, and we can tend to miss it because we are so familiar with the story. But the original Jewish audience wouldn't have missed it because it was shocking to them. And in this case, the twist to this parable is the same thing, it is the key. After this master of the vineyard sends all of his servants and they end up getting beaten and thrown out and stoned to death, it then says this, “afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’” Now pause there for a second. If you were the owner of a vineyard, and you lived away, and you had been

sending servants to these wicked tenants, and over and over again they not only persecuted them, but they killed them, they stoned them to death, would your next step be to say “Hey! I’ve got it. Let me send my son.” That doesn’t make any sense at all, because these people have shown that they honestly don't respect your emissaries, and the only thing you're doing is setting your son up to be put to death as well.

So this is one of those cases where you would be scratching your head if you were hearing the parable. What kind of crazy father would send his own son to a group of wicked tenants such as this. And the answer is that this is not an ordinary father, and this is not an ordinary son. It's an allegory here for God the Father sending Jesus, his son, to offer his life, knowing full well he is going to die for the sake of the sins of the world in order to bring in the coming of the kingdom of God. That's what's going on in this parable. So obviously here in this case the son represents Christ, the son represents the Messiah, the son represents Jesus, who is in fact killed by the leaders of Jerusalem. And just as in the parable, it says that the tenants took him and cast him out of the vineyard, the same thing happens with Jesus' body. He is executed by the Jewish leaders not inside the city, but outside the walls of the city, in a sense, outside the walls of the vineyard. John's Gospel makes that clear in John 19, that Golgotha is outside the city walls.

So what are the results of this parable? You can see Jesus saying here, “here is the story, what would the owner of the vineyard do?” Well in this case, even the chief priests and elders in the audience recognize that he's going to kill those miserable wretches. He is going to put them to death and is going to give the vineyard to somebody else. And that's really where they stumble onto it, because Jesus takes that truth that they have just uttered and says, “there is the key,” and he goes back to the Old Testament and says “haven’t you read in the Scriptures, ‘the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner’”? Now you might be thinking, what is he talking about? Well he's quoting Psalm 118, which was a very famous Psalm in Jewish tradition for two reasons. First, it was the Psalm that was sung during the Passover. It was one of the hallel psalms, a series of Psalms, Psalms 113-118, that people would chant as they celebrated Passover. So this was one of the psalms that everybody knew. You knew all the verses. You knew all the lines. You knew the melody. You knew how to chant it. You knew how to sing it. So when Jesus quotes Psalm 118, everybody would've known what text he was

referring to. But in Jewish tradition, this Psalm was also understood as a prophecy of the Messiah.

So when it says “the stone that the builders rejected has become the head of corner,” the image there is of the stone as a symbol for the Messiah, who becomes the foundation stone for a new temple. Which, in Jewish tradition, when the Messiah comes, one of things he would do is that he would build a new temple, and he would usher in the time of a new Jerusalem, a new city of Jerusalem. So in this case, what Jesus is doing here is basically saying to them, “I am the stone” (in other words “I am the Messiah”) “rejected by the builders,” (who are you, namely the leaders of Jerusalem) “but although you've rejected me, I'm going to become the cornerstone of a new Jerusalem and a new temple.” Now what does that imply then about the current Temple and the current Jerusalem? Well just like Jeremiah before him and just like Isaiah, this is the kind of implicit threat where Jesus is warning them that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. The Temple itself is going to come down as Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel. That's going to be one of the charges they bring up against him at his trial. He said that he would “destroy this temple and in three days build another.” Well when does Jesus ever really say “Hey, I'm going to destroy the temple” in the Gospel of Matthew? Well he doesn't, but there's a kind implicit threat in this verse that the Temple is going to be destroyed going back to the Psalm 118.

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He goes even further and he says, “therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.” So what is that referring to there? Well again, remember his audience. He is talking to the leaders in Jerusalem, and the kingdom of God is basically what the vineyard represented. And so what he is saying is “the kingdom is going to be taken away from you leaders in Jerusalem and it is going to be given to another nation.” Now what would that represent? Well on the one hand, you might have a kind of indication here that the kingdom is going to break out and go beyond Israel to include the Gentiles as well. But I would say that even before that, what Jesus is getting at here is a notion of a new Israel that he's gathering around himself. You can see that in Matthew 19:28 when Jesus says to the apostles, “Amen, I say to you, in the new creation, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” So who are going to be the leaders of



this new Israel? Well it is the Twelve Apostles. Just like the twelve patriarchs were the leaders of the first Israel, now the kingdom is going to be transferred through Jesus to his apostles, and they are going to sit on thrones ruling the twelve tribes of Israel. So in other words, he's talking about the Church. He's describing the apostolic Church that he's going to institute on his followers. No longer will the chief priest be the rulers, as they were in the old covenant, but now the apostles are, in a sense, going to be the new chief priests, the new elders of this new Israel and the new covenant kingdom.

Alright. Now in the lectionary there was one verse that was omitted, but I didn't want to omit it because I think it's really important, because it really is the ending of the parable. When Jesus says this language, "he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one, it will crush him." And you are like, "what is he talking about here?" You might be thinking that. Again, the key lies in the Old Testament. He's alluding here to the book of Daniel 2. The whole chapter is important, but in Daniel 2:44-45 — I won't read the text — basically Daniel gives a prophecy in which a little stone strikes at the foot of this great statue and it makes the whole statue come crashing down to the ground. The prophet Daniel interprets this vision and he says that the stone represents the kingdom that the God of heaven will set up. In other words, it's the kingdom of heaven, whereas the statue that was destroyed by the stone represented the pagan empires of the world that were represented by gold, silver and bronze — namely the the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, and all the way down to the Roman Empire. So the image of a stone falling on someone and crushing him is another image of the kingdom of God from the Old Testament that the elders of Israel would've been familiar with. But in this case, in a sense, Jesus turns it on them and on the city of Jerusalem, so that the kingdom that he's inaugurating here, if it's rejected by Jerusalem, it will lead to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem itself. In other words, this is a warning to the elders of Israel to repent and to accept Jesus as the Messiah who has come to inaugurate the kingdom of God that was not only spoken of in the Psalms, but also spoken of by the prophet Daniel.

So I just wanted to give you that background because sometimes people might be a little scandalized by this image of a stone falling on someone and crushing them. "What's that about?" It is an allusion to the power of the kingdom of God, which is going to topple every earthly kingdom that is opposed to it. It is even going to

topple the worldly power of the chief priests and the elders that they have accrued for themselves in the city of Jerusalem. So this is a very dire, dire parable, and again, although the lectionary stops, you can see this if you kept reading in Matthew's Gospel. There is one last verse I want to share with you. After Jesus gives the parable, it says in Matthew 21:45, "when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. But when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet." So in this case, it's really clear from Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is telling this parable against the leaders in Jerusalem and that they get it. And as a result, they seek to arrest him and to put him to death. Which at this point in the Gospel, they are not successful, but in a couple of chapters they will end up, through Judas's intervention, getting Jesus arrested and being able to have him crucified, in part because he told the parable of the wicked tenants. So this is a dangerous parable. In a sense, you could say that this is one of the parables of Jesus that got him killed, got him crucified, and Matthew highlights that in a particular way.

Alright, so what does this parable mean for us today? What might be the spiritual meaning of the parable? Obviously, it's very focused on Jesus' immediate context of his passion, death, resurrection and his ministry in Jerusalem, but what could it mean for us. Well in this case I would turn your attention to the Second Vatican Council, which actually made a reference to the parable of the wicked tenants in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, one of the most important documents of Vatican II about the nature of the Church. In *Lumen Gentium* 6, Vatican II used the parable to talk about the identity and the mission of the Church as the new vineyard of the Lord. So let me read to you what Vatican II said. It says this:

The Church is a piece of land to be cultivated, the tillage of God... That land, like a choice vineyard, has been planted by the heavenly Husbandman. The true vine is Christ who gives life and the power to bear abundant fruit to the branches, that is, to us, who through the Church remain in Christ without whom we can do nothing.

Okay, so what does that mean for us today? I would say that it means at least two things. First — and this is important — sometimes we as Catholics tend to think of

the Church as ours. “The Catholic Church is my Church. I belong to the Church and the Catholic Church belongs to me.” Well there's a sense in which that is true, but there is also a sense in which that's not true. The Church is not my institution or your institution, it is God's, and the image of the vineyard makes that very clear. The Church is God's own vineyard, it's his vineyard, and we are workers in the vineyard. We are tenants in the vineyard, and so our job in the vineyard is not to do our will, our job is to do the owner of the vineyard's will. And the owner of the vineyard, both in heaven and on earth — every owner of every vineyard — wants his workers to cultivate the fruits of the vineyard. He wants his vineyard to bear fruit, and so we are called to bear fruit as well. And in this case, the fruit that we are called to bear is the fruit of righteousness. And the implicit warning of this parable of the wicked tenants doesn't just apply to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, or the chief priests and elders, it applies to us as well. God has called us in the Church to bear good fruit, “to bear good fruit for good wine,” as Jesus says in the Gospel, to bear fruit that remains. But if instead of doing that, we fail to do God's will and we bear fruit for wickedness, if we ignore the cry of the oppressed like Isaiah talks about in Isaiah 5, if we engage in acts of wickedness, we can lose our share in the vineyard of Lord as well, we can lose our share in the kingdom of God as well. So belief in the fact that I belong to the vineyard, so to speak, is not enough. We also need to have the works of righteousness that show that we are true tenants, true workers, in the vineyard of the Lord.