

Vespers Homily

The Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 20, 2015

Psalm 80:7-14
Matthew 21:33-46

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To really understand the significance of this passage from Matthew we have to go back a few years – 800 years, actually.

In approximately 740 BC the prophet Isaiah wrote:

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 watch-tower 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 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.

There are at least three writers under the name of Isaiah. This is from the first Isaiah, the writer of books 1 through 39, called “proto-Isaiah.” This is a warning.

At the time this warning was written, there were two separate kingdoms of Jews. The Northern Kingdom, called Israel, was made up of ten of the original twelve tribes. The Southern Kingdom, Judah including Jerusalem, consisted of the remaining two tribes.

Massed on the northern approaches to Israel were the armies of the aggressive kingdom of Assyria, with obvious designs on expansion and conquest. Isaiah writes of Israel as the vineyard of God; it is about to receive punishment and destruction for failing to be what God had intended. Instead of grapes it had produced “wild grapes.” The Hebrew actually means “sour fruit” or “stinking fruit.”

The destruction of Israel was inevitable. The nation was destroyed, and its people were carried off in slavery. Isaiah’s warning was actually for the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They were now to be the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts, His “pleasant planting.” God was no more pleased by Judah than He had been with Israel. He saw strife and bloodshed; He saw no righteousness. He warned them, “Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.” They were deaf to his warning.

In less than one hundred years, Judah, too, was destroyed, this time by the armies of Babylon, and the people were carried off in slavery to Babylon.

The writer of Mark read and saw the relevance of this passage in Isaiah to his own time. The Jews were in much the same situation as they had been more than 700 years earlier. In many ways they had failed to be, and to do, as God commanded, and the agent of their punishment, the armies of Rome, were massed against them. Foremost in Mark's eyes were their rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah whom God had sent to lead them to righteousness.

Writing in the 60's, thirty years after the crucifixion, Mark made additions to Isaiah. In the 70's Matthew followed the writing of Mark; in the 80's or 90's Luke included the passage in his gospel.

In this metaphor the landowner is God; His vineyard is the nation of Israel, the homeland of the reunited Jewish people. The Jews do not own Israel; they are tenants on the land, living there by the grace of God. God has leased it to them at the price of their faithful obedience to His laws.

In time, the Jews forgot that they were dependent on the grace and good will of their God, and they rebelled against Him. They rejected the "slaves" or "agents of God," by which Matthew means the prophets; they ignored them or drove them away, wounding or killing them. Prophets in the Old Testament sense were not ones who predicted what was to come; they commented and tried to correct the short-comings of the day. They were there to open the eyes of the short-sighted Jews to their impending destruction. Generally speaking, they failed.

Finally, God sent His beloved son, Jesus, a last attempt to offer a path back to restore their relationship to God. Jesus embodied what it means truly to follow God's commandments. He was killed by Jews with the complicity of the Romans.

Jesus was killed for a variety of reasons. To the Romans, he was a potential threat to the security and peace of their occupation of Israel. To the Jews, it was His presence as a sign and demonstration of what truly being God's chosen people would demand of them. He was the living reminder of how far astray they had fallen. He reminded them that they were, in fact, leasing the land of Israel from God.

Again, their failure to listen to a prophet, as the Jews considered Jesus, led to their destruction, and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple and the nation disappeared under foreign rule; the "wretches were put to a miserable death."

So we come to the last few lines of this reading from Matthew. Once again, Matthew follows the Gospel of Mark. Mark himself follows an earlier writing, lines 22 and 23 of Psalm 118.

We really don't give the Psalms the attention they deserve. They are not simply filler between readings from the Old and New Testament. They were very significant to the culture and worship of the Jews. They reflect a broad spectrum of Jewish life, from personal and communal joy to fear and anguish. There are songs of praise to be sung in the Temple at Jerusalem, and there are individual laments.

Seven hundred years before Mark wrote his gospel, the psalmist wrote in Psalm 118, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our sight." The psalmist's reference is obscure; it might be a reference to the building or rebuilding of the Temple.

Mark plainly sees it as a reference to Jesus. Jesus had offered the Jews a new "temple," a new center for their faith, building a new Israel in which a renewed sense of righteousness was to be the foundation. Jesus, in His words and His actions, was the cornerstone of the new Israel, and He had been rejected.

We, as Christians, see Jesus is the cornerstone, not of one nation but of a new world, a new righteousness, a new relationship with God for Jews and Gentiles. The warning of the Psalmist and of Mark and Matthew has as much relevance today as it did then.

The focus, in the face of ephemeral issues and distractions, must be on the solid cornerstone that is Jesus Christ.

In His Holy Name.