

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

4 October 2020



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
who in the abundance of your kindness
surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you,
pour out your mercy upon us
to pardon what conscience dreads
and to give what prayer does not dare to ask.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Vineyards and olive groves are still to be seen gracing the hillsides of Israel and Palestine. They have both played a significant role in the agricultural economy of the region. More importantly for us vines, vineyards and grapes have all served as important symbols in the religious imagination of Israel. Prophets and poets often spoke of Israel as God's vineyard. It is no surprise that Jesus makes use of this time-honoured tradition.

Both Isaiah and Jesus are inviting us out of our scientific mindsets into the world of symbol and myth. How could they do otherwise? Their subject is love. All they have to say is about the love affair between Creator and creation, between Divine Lover and humankind. Love demands a poetic form of discourse, and this is what we are given today. But prophetic poetry can convey hard truths and pronounce sentence as we soon see.

In between these challenging texts Paul invites us to imagine ourselves filled with the peace of God. "There is no need to worry . . . The God of peace will be with you".

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

5:1–7

Let me sing to my friend
the song of his love for his vineyard.
My friend has a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
He dug the soil, cleared it of stones,
and planted choice vines in it.
In the middle he built a tower,
he dug a press there too.
He expected it to yield grapes,
but sour grapes were all that it gave.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
I ask you to judge
between my vineyard and me.
What could I have done for my vineyard
that I have not done?
I expected it to yield grapes.
Why did it yield sour grapes instead?
Very well, I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge for it to be grazed on,
and knock down its wall for it to be trampled on.
I will lay it waste, unpruned, undug;
overgrown by the briar and the thorn.
I will command the clouds to rain no rain on it.
Yes, the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the House of Israel,
and the men of Judah
that chosen plant.
He expected justice, but found bloodshed,
integrity, but only a cry of distress.

First Reading

The reading from the prophet is part poem, part parable, part oracle of judgement.

The first section is in the form of a love song for a beloved friend. It paints a vivid picture of the friend's labour of love for his vineyard, only to have it come to nothing.

The second section – “And now . . .” – brings a sudden change of mood and speaker. The friend and owner of the vineyard addresses the people of Judah and Jerusalem as a jury. They are called to make a judgement about the vineyard – which of course they cannot do without passing judgement on themselves.

In the third section – “Very well . . .” – the owner passes sentence on the vineyard. It will be laid waste.

In the fourth and final section – “Yes, the vineyard . . .” – the prophet identifies the vineyard as “the House of Israel” and the owner as “the Lord of hosts”. The message is made brutally clear. God had “expected justice, but found bloodshed, integrity, but only a cry of distress”.

This is a particularly challenging text for readers to proclaim and for the congregation to hear. Readers will need to study it very closely to identify the various parts of the reading, each with its own character and tone. They are asked to make the transition from tender love song to courtroom address to judicial sentence to final comment – not an easy task. What will help is keeping their role in mind: to enable the congregation to hear and understand this word of God.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 79:9, 12–16, 19–20

R. The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.
You brought a vine out of Egypt;
to plant it you drove out the nations.
It stretched out its branches to the sea,
to the Great River it stretched out its shoots. **R.**
Then why have you broken down its walls?
It is plucked by all who pass by.
It is ravaged by the boar of the forest,
devoured by the beasts of the field. **R.**
God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see.
Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted. **R.**
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your name.
God of hosts, bring us back;
let your face shine on us and we shall be saved. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Most unusually, the response for the responsorial psalm is not taken from a psalm at all. It is a line from the prophet Isaiah. Readers will readily recognise it from the concluding section of the first reading: “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel”. The congregation will not be familiar with this as a response, so it needs to be proclaimed very clearly indeed (after the usual silent pause following the reading). It may need to be repeated with the congregation the first time.

Psalm 79/80 is a prayer from the people for the restoration of Israel. The central image is that of vine and vineyard, and the overall tone that of a loved one pleading for the healing of a broken relationship. There is a progression through the four verses. The first recalls the exodus and settlement in the Promised Land. The second laments the dire straits in which Israel finds itself. The third is an urgent plea for God's help. The fourth begins with a pledge of renewed faithfulness and moves back into petition. Readers will need to attend carefully to these changes of mood.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians 4:6–9

There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise. Keep doing all the things that you learnt from me and have been taught by me and have heard or seen that I do. Then the God of peace will be with you.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 21:33–43

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: 'Listen to another parable. There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard; he fenced it round, dug a winepress in it and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad. When vintage time drew near he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third. Next he sent some more servants, this time a larger number, and they dealt with them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance." So they seized him and 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 answered, 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him when the season arrives.' Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:

It was the stone rejected by the builders
that became the keystone.
This was the Lord's doing
and it is wonderful to see?

'I tell you, then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.'

Second Reading

From last Sunday's excerpt from Philippians we fast-forward two chapters. We finished at 2:11 and resume today at 4:6. It is hard to understand why the previous two verses weren't included in today's reading: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near" (4:4–5). We do hear this beautiful text once every three years in Advent, but it would have borne repeating here.

Nonetheless the reading that we have is gracious and loving. Paul offers wise advice to the community for which he has such deep affection. He wants them to pray with such serenity and thankfulness that they will be blessed with the peace of God. He encourages them to dwell in their minds on all that is good. The list Paul gives of such things – what is true, noble, good, pure, honourable, virtuous and praiseworthy – may well derive from the Stoic philosophers, but he feels free to adopt them.

Readers have only to glance at the reading to be captivated by the spirit of Paul's love for the Philippians. The text should be read prayerfully and slowly, allowing the congregation time to savour its wisdom.

Gospel

A form of the parable of the wicked tenants is found in each of the synoptic gospels. It may be that the original story has been lost because by the time it found its way into the gospel tradition it had been "allegorised". Simply put, an allegory is a story in which different elements are identified as having a specific meaning. This contrasts with the most authentic parables where it is an unexpected ending that discloses meaning and generates insight.

In today's version of the parable it is clear that we are intended to see the landowner as God, the vineyard as Israel, the servants as prophets, the tenants as the Jewish authorities, and the son as Jesus. It is crucial to remember where in the gospel narrative this story appears. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem for the last time and the conflict between him and the religious leaders has become intense and irreversible. We must also be mindful of the role this story plays in later years as the Christian and Jewish communities begin to part company and see themselves as rivals.

The parable begins by drawing directly on the first verses of the reading from Isaiah. Later on it cites verses from Psalm 117/118 that are used in several places in the New Testament to shed light on Jesus' death and resurrection (see 1 Peter 2:7 and Ephesians 2:20 for example).

It is strange that the gospel reading does not go on to include the two verses that bring the chapter to a close (23:45–46). They spell out the reaction of the religious authorities to these parables of Jesus. We never hear them read on a Sunday or major feast.

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)