HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 27 YEAR A

8 OCTOBER 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

For the third Sunday running in this year A of the Sunday cycle of readings, the year of Matthew, we hear a parable of a vineyard. Two weeks ago it was the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, all of whom receive one denarius for their work however long their employment, last week it was the two sons asked by their father to work in the vineyard, one of whom says he will not but *does*, the other who says he will but does *not*. Today it is the parable of the wicked tenants who mistreat the servants sent to collect the produce, eventually killing the son and heir; in Matthew as in the other two synoptic gospels this is clearly a parable of the fate of the prophets sent to Israel and ultimately of Jesus, the ‘stone rejected by the builders’.

But this Sunday more than previously, by the choice of the first reading, it is made clear that this use of vineyard parables, is in fact based firmly in Isaiah chapter 5, which tells or rather as the opening words say ‘sings’, of a vineyard owned by a friend planted with tower and winepress (just as in Jesus’ parable) intended to yield fine grapes, but it yields only sour grapes.

Isaiah is clear about the meaning of the image: ‘Yes, the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the House of Israel and the men of Judah, that chosen plant’. Jesus through the evangelists too clearly expects this to be obvious to his hearers: the vineyard is tended by the people of Israel until, given their continuing and persistent failure culminating in the rejection of Jesus, it is taken from them and offered to a new Israel arising from the Son slain, but risen, the Lord’s doing, risen on the day which the Lord has made.

If we want to be the new tenants, the new Israel, formed anew by Christ, the sons and daughters of the Kingdom, then we need today to heed a small detail found only in Matthew’s version of the parable, but twice repeated by him and characteristic of his gospel. As in all the accounts Jesus asks a pointed question after telling of the death of the son; ‘Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ which is answered ‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants’ and then comes the Matthaean addition ‘who will deliver the produce to him when the season arrives’ and in case we miss it the point is repeated in the final phrase of today’s gospel, which now uses the word ‘kingdom’ explicitly: ‘The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people, who will produce its fruit’.

‘Deliver the produce’; ‘Produce its fruit’. The vineyard is the kingdom, so what are the grapes, the fruit we are to yield? The answer was already there, all along in the prophecy the evangelists were using; Isaiah says at the end of the passage we heard this morning that the friend who owns the vineyard, who is the Lord of hosts, looks to the House of Israel, the men of Judah, that chosen plant, for justice but he found bloodshed, for integrity but only a cry of distress. Justice and integrity.

In today’s second reading Paul challenges the people of Philippi to lives that are noble, good and pure; to the Romans in a rare use of kingdom language Paul says that the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Matthew has been making this the Lord’s theme since the beginning of his gospel, two of the beatitudes are ‘blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see justice prevail’ and ‘Blessed are the pure in heart’, those leading lives of integrity. And the final parable of the sheep and the goats will say that those counted sheep will be those who loved others in works of kindness and so loved Christ. Jesus’ final words in Matthew’s gospel nearly will be ‘teach them to observe all that I command you’.

Are we good new tenants of the vineyard, bearing fruit in justice and integrity? At least at times, if not very often, that feels an awkward question. So it may be a help to consider how the vineyard parable develops in St John’s Gospel chapter 15. There we become not just the vineyard but the vine or at least are grafted onto the true vine who is Christ. God the Father is the vinedresser and those branches that do not bear fruit he cuts away, but even those that do he prunes to make them bear even more. So we must be ready to experience the sharpness of God’s pruning and, as always in Mass, we remember that the readings are there to encourage our prayer for God’s grace, to enable us to do what we cannot do by ourselves.

We are invited to make our own the prayer of today’s psalm ‘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’ and to pray with the opening collect: ‘pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask’. We know only too well that this tender fragile work of ours needs so badly God’s protection and his mercy for which we hardly dare to ask. Hence it is that we come to this Mass and to this communion.