

Matthew 21: 33-46 Another Time, Another Place.

Our first reading from the Hebrew Scripture is from the Book of Isaiah. The original Isaiah was a prophet who lived and worked in Jerusalem, more than 700 years before Jesus' time. I say "original" Isaiah, because he was such an influential prophet that prophets who came later also wrote under his name and are included in the Book of Isaiah. So, he was something of a brand-name prophet.

In the biblical sense, the word "prophesy" does not mean "to predict the future." Rather, a prophet is someone who receives the Word from God to give to God's people. A prophet is not a sage or a wise person who imparts his or her own wisdom or idea. Rather, their calling is to convey to the people the words of God that God wants them to hear.

Isaiah was the temple prophet in Jerusalem for the royal court of the kingdom of Judah. The occasion for this song by Isaiah we are about to hear, was most likely one of the great gatherings at the temple to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles, after the harvest. Hear now Isaiah Chapter 5: 1-7, his song of vineyard:

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

2 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.

3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

4 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?

5 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.

6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

7 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 struck you about this “love song”? We learn at the end that the owner of the vineyard who took such a loving tender care of it is God. And the vineyard is God’s people, the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the excellent vines God took such pleasure in planting.

God invested so much in the people God had chosen, like the owner of the vineyard who went all out, building costly watchtower for protection from thieves and a winepress for the much-anticipated crop of grapes; so great was God’s love for them and so great was God’s expectation for them to produce good grapes.

And what do the “good grapes” stand for in this parable? They stand for justice and righteousness, for God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.

But what is the “justice” God was looking for? According to the Scripture, it is what one finds in a community where people are in fair and equitable relationship with one another.” And what does “righteousness” look like for God? Righteousness in the bible means being in the right relationship with God, and the right relationship with God is one where we put our trust in God above all else.

The sole purpose, and the whole reason God created and tended the vineyard is to create an eco-system in which vines thrived to produce these fruits.

But something went awry and instead of justice, there was bloodshed; instead, righteousness, God heard a cry of distress.

In our worship liturgy, we lift up the “nice” sides of God, citing the Psalm that says, “the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” and “the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.” But here, in this “love song” Isaiah sings to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, you can almost hear God screaming “It’s Not Okay!” It’s not okay there is bloodshed instead of justice in my vineyard; it’s not okay I hear the cry of distress from the people who trust in me.

Could you hear in this song God’s pain and sadness as well as God’s anger? This is all wrong; this is not acceptable; I will have it destroyed. God is furious because God loves and cares so deeply. So, it is a love-song after all. Pain and anger are real, but love is stronger and runs deeper, even when the beloved who cause you pain is oblivious to what they’ve done to hurt you. Hear now, the 2nd reading from the Hebrew Scripture.

Psalm 80: 7-15.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.
 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.
 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its
 branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.
 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.
 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see;
 have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.

The people lament over God's absence as they see their vineyard languish and they don't know why. They think it's God's fault, for deserting them and abandoning the vineyard. They do acknowledge the great things God had done for them; God rescued them out of Egypt and settled them in the land of promise, and the kingdom of Israel extended from the upper Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea. But now the stone walls of God's protecting presence are gone. Why? What happened? They are oblivious. It doesn't even occur to them to reflect on what THEY did to what God had given them, the vineyard. All they can do is to appeal to God: have regard for this vine. "Restore us," they say, but do they know their restoration comes only when they start acting justly towards one another and follow God's way. Would they ever learn?

It is God who, no matter how disappointed and frustrated, continues to hope for the vineyard to yield good grapes. God tries time and again, trying to open the eyes of God's people, sending them prophets into their midst, and finally God's son. Another time, but in the same place, Jerusalem. Hear now the Gospel according to Matthew 21: 33-46. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and is confronted by the chief priests and elders of the temple who questions the source of his authority. He tells a story as his response to their questioning.

33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

42 Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:
 “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
 this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?’

43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Clearly, Jesus has extended the prophet Isaiah’s love-song for God’s vineyard to his time; it’s the same love-song sung in another time but in the same place, Jerusalem. God the vineyard owner is again seen planting a vineyard, another time, another place, but with exactly the same care as God had done in Isaiah’s song.

This time, God goes away, entrusting the care of the vineyard to certain tenants. When it is the harvest time, the vineyard owner sends his servants to collect the fruits, but the tenants beat them, stone them and killed them, until the last one, the owner’s own Son, is also killed.

In Jesus’s parable, those servants sent by the vineyard owner are the prophets, who confronted the tenants with God’s demands of justice and righteousness and but saw bloodshed. If the Bible is witness, this is what’s been repeating in different times and different places, but to the same tune; bloodshed, instead of justice.

Just as Isaiah, singing the part of the vineyard owner asked those gathered in the Jerusalem Temple, the religious leaders of his time, to judge between God and God’s vineyard, Jesus asks the religious leaders of his time, what the owner of the vineyard would do to those tenants. Jesus lets the religious leaders declare judgement upon themselves, “oh, those wretches should be put to a miserable death and give the vineyard to another who would take better care of it.” Their words, not his. They realize the parable ss directed at them; what’s in their hearts is laid bare.

But Jesus focus is not on the judgment but what God will do with the one they rejected and killed. God took the stone that was rejected and made it the cornerstone of something new, this emerging group of those who follow Jesus.

This parable had been misused to create a false narrative that the Christian church took over the vineyard because the Judaism failed God; no that’s not it at all. It only means, God is still waiting for the harvest, from all the tenants of God’s vineyard everywhere. And the Holy Spirit is still asking, through the Scripture, how is your vineyard doing?

So, how's our vineyard doing? Whether it is our church, our family, our community, and our country, our world, wherever we are sent to produce good grapes. God is just as angry as God was then in Isaiah's love-song, whenever we neglect our vineyard and let bloodshed stain the land. Isaiah's love-song for God's vineyard is still playing, in another time and another place, that is, in our time and in our world today, and this morning, again in Israel.

God is not okay with it, because God's love for God's vineyard never changes. Let us labor on, for God's love's sake. We are the beloved of God. Amen.