

Are We Wild Vines?

Is. 5: 1-7; Phil. 4: 6-9; Matt. 21: 33-43

Farming involves a lot of work; ploughing, planting, irrigating, harvesting. All of this work is in the hopes of obtaining a good harvest at the end of the growing season. Imagine the farmer's disappointment if, in spite of his best efforts, the crop yield is poor.

In the First Reading, Isaiah tells the story of a farmer who planted a vineyard after clearing the land and preparing the soil. He protected the vineyard on all sides with a hedge and expected a good yield of grapes. He did everything that He could to ensure that the vines would be productive. Instead, the grape vines gave him a harvest of small wild grapes; not useful for making wine. In his bitter disappointment, the farmer decided to lay waste to the vineyard and turn it into a desert.

This is an ominous message for the people of Israel. They are the vineyard and God is the farmer. Over the centuries, God had nurtured and protected the Israelites but they had not yielded good fruit. Their ways of living and their treatment of each other were not in keeping with God's commandments. They had not produced the harvest that He had expected so He was prepared to destroy them.

For us, the message is the same. God has created us and given us everything we need to produce a bounty of good fruit. We have been given a beautiful world to live in. Over the centuries, He has given us apostles, prophets, saints, popes and many others to serve as examples and teachers to show us how to live in accordance with God's commandments.

In many ways, we have rejected what we have been given. We have not cooperated with God and have often rendered to Him a disappointing harvest. We have laid waste to the vineyard ourselves when we consider the social, political, economic, environmental and many other issues that we have created that have spoiled the world we live in.

In the Gospel, Jesus retells the parable of the master who planted a vineyard and protected it with a hedge. Then he went away to another country leaving the vineyard in the care of some tenants. At harvest time, he sent his slaves to collect his produce but the tenants killed the slaves. Then the master sent more slaves but the tenants killed them too. Finally, the master sent his son thinking that the tenants would not harm him. But the tenants killed the son also.

Clearly, this parable is aimed at the Jewish people. The master is God. The tenants are the Jewish leaders who rejected the words of the prophets and ultimately killed His son, Jesus. But Jesus uses this parable not to predict the destruction of Israel but to show God's infinite patience and mercy in giving the Jews every chance to hear and accept His message. Even after the killing of the son, rather than destroying Israel, God continues to search for people who will accept His commandments and to whom He can give the heavenly inheritance.

Listening to this parable can be depressing. We are all sinners and we can feel that we have given God a disappointing harvest that will cause us to be laid waste. But Paul gives us hope in the Second Reading when he says: 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'

Paul tells us to conform our lives to whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable. He tells us to think about these excellent and praiseworthy things at all times and be guided by them. In doing so we will be cooperating with God and we will render a harvest pleasing to Him.