Spirituality
Scripture for Life

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Who could fail to empathize with Isaiah's heartbroken planter? The poor man loved his land with all he had, molding it with his muscles, caressing it with his hands — never a mention of a servant to do the hard work. Once all was ready, he built a tower from which to gaze on its growth and protect it.

Alas, his hopes were dashed; the produce didn't serve even for vinegar. What was there to do other than let it go wild and let the goats have their way with it?

Jesus turned Isaiah's song of lament into a more personal parable. He transformed the relationship between proprietor and land into one between an owner and tenants. As we listen to his tale, we hear echoes of the preface to the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer: "Again and again you offered a covenant ... and taught us to hope for salvation."

Jesus' parable recounts the underside of the story, turning it into a critique of his audience of closed-minded chief priests and elders. Underlining how the parable put the religious leaders on trial, Matthew described the treatment of the son in precise parallel to what the leaders eventually would do to Jesus: "They seized him, threw him out of [Jerusalem] and killed him."

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 8, 2023

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-43

Responding to Jesus' question about what the owner should do, the leaders pronounced sentence on themselves. Applying a theory of retribution, they said, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death." In other words, they should reap the same evil they sowed.

Jesus didn't follow their avenging lead. Instead of a violent vengeance for their evil, he simply says, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you."

That sentence subtly reveals that by both their treatment of prophets and their way of dealing with sinners they disqualify themselves for the kingdom that Jesus would make present among them.

Jesus' words continue to echo the preface we hear so often. Phrases like "You did not abandon us to the power of death" and "He destroyed death and restored life" reveal what Jesus teaches about God's approach to fickle humanity.

When Isaiah's friend's vineyard didn't produce, the owner took away its protection and let it go wild. In contrast, Jesus gave people the freedom to judge for themselves: Did they want to live by the forgiving, loving norms of God's reign or did they prefer a kingdom of their own making? God leaves the power in our hands.

Jesus' question about what will happen to those who reject God's messengers applies to everyone who reads the Gospel. It asks us, "What kind of realm do we hope to create among ourselves?"

Over and again, when we decide how to reward or condemn others, we hear Jesus say, "Leave the judgment to me."

We heard this in Matthew 13, when Jesus warned against weeding the field. As we recalled last week, that was the angel's message to Joseph: "Do not be afraid" (Matthew 1:18-25). It is also the underlying theme of Jesus' command to forgive.

In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul offers another angle on this teaching. His message? "Have no anxiety."

Any sense that this is a Pollyanna approach gets kiboshed when we remember that Paul was writing from prison. He found his situation of confinement and danger of death a good place from which to teach about prayer.

"Yes," he says, "make your requests known to God, ask and do it with thanksgiving!"

He's not saying that the God "who makes all things work for good" (Romans 8:28) is unaware, but rather that asking for God's help will keep praying people attentive to how God would lead them forth. Thanksgiving keeps us conscious of how many ways God has been present to us. Because it is based on remembering God's good care,

requesting help with gratitude becomes the recipe for knowing "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding."

Today's readings invite us into at least two styles of prayer. The first, as Paul says, is to pray with the trust that produces peace, remembering that God urges us toward unimaginable good in every circumstance.

The second might be more of a loving contemplation. Following Isaiah's lead, we open ourselves to feel with the God of the vineyard, the owner who is laden with almost unbearable sadness at what has happened to what he had created with such care.

The dynamic of both of these prayers is the same. They lead to love of God, to a life that Paul calls honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, etc. Such prayer also leads us into the mustard-seed fruitfulness that transforms the world.

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