

## 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday – Year A

Many of the commentaries on the readings for this Sunday make the connection between the readings and the current environmental issues that are plaguing our world.

That's understandable. The relationship seems almost too uncanny to be avoided.

Before we walk too far down that road, though, it would be helpful to consider what Isaiah and Jesus were trying to convey with their image of the vineyard, so as to see how their message has wider implications. The vineyard metaphor works in a lot of different situations

One of the characteristics of the vineyard as Isaiah describes it is that it is a good gift. The vineyard is in good shape, excellent shape even, lacking nothing when it is handed over to those who would tend it.

To be sure, tending it would entail work, but we get the impression that if one simply is attentive to what needs to be done, there will be a rich harvest. The Lord has left them no barren desert to try to eke a living out of.

Jesus takes up that sense of the good condition of the vineyard in his retelling of the story, even enhancing the quality of the vineyard with images like the fertile hillside, the choicest vines, a winepress nearby, etc.

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There's no reason why tending the vineyard would not produce a good harvest. It's almost a no-brainer.

All the more to wonder what happened! Wild grapes was not the intended result. Tenants who try to wrest the vineyard away from the owner was not what he had in mind. There was no good reason why that should have been the result.

Isaiah tells his original story to get at what was going on in Israel about 700 years before Jesus: the community of God's chosen people was not developing as God intended.

Instead of being a light to the nations, social injustice was running rampant. Those in power were neglecting the needy—the widow and orphan and stranger in their midst—in favor of amassing wealth to themselves. The king was included in this assessment. He had allowed the social fabric to unravel.

Jesus used the vineyard metaphor to confront the religious leaders of his day who wanted to cling to the power they wielded, even though it meant putting to death God's son. What had been designed as a means of proclaiming God's truth had become a cudgel to beat people with and keep them in place.

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I think we put these challenging stories to best use when we recognize that they address a basic human tendency. It's playing itself out in how we deal with the environment, considering it primarily as a source of raw materials to exploit rather than the organic web that sustains all life, but the basic human tendency toward self-centeredness certainly is not limited to that.

Human society, left to its own devices, will never do justice to the gifts God has placed in our midst. Without an orientation toward God, the owner of the vineyard, human society seems naturally to degenerate into a situation of haves and have-nots, of those who have more working things to their advantage until they have it all, with the many being relegated to lives of misery.

One of our friars just came back from a two-week visit to Central America. It was the first time he had been confronted with the standard of living that so many of our neighbors living in the urban sprawl of the 3<sup>rd</sup> world have been dealing with for decades now.

It affected him deeply. He's older, he joined us when he was in his 40s, but somehow it had never made an impact before, even though the situation certainly is not new.

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That's part of the problem. These issues are not new. They play themselves out in new ways, perhaps, but the problems are perennial, meaning that it takes work to keep them from fading into the background.

We are called upon to think of ourselves as the current tenders of the vineyard and to ask ourselves how we are doing. The answer can't be limited to economics, as if a rise in the stock market was all the proof we needed. The better measure has to do with the quality of our common life, and especially with how the poor and vulnerable are doing. They are part of the vineyard, too.

St. Paul provides an exhortation for keeping things in proper focus: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, ... think of these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you."