

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7
Second Reading: Philippians 4:6-9
Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43

During the last few weeks we have listened to Gospels in which Jesus talks of a vineyard and the master who owns it and the labourers who work there. Vineyards were plentiful at the time of Christ. Everyone drank wine, so vineyards were a sign of the power and wealth of those who owned them and a source of employment for many men and women. So, it is no great surprise that stories of vineyards play such a great part in the Bible, and the First Reading, psalm and Gospel of this Sunday are a good example of that.

However, the picture of a vineyard is not one which we are familiar with in Ireland. Not that many of us have actually seen a vineyard outside of the TV, a book or postcard. Vineyards are something we associate with warm sunny climates such as southern European, Australian, Chilean, South African etc. We are aware that the vineyards in these countries provide us with a great choice of wines when go to the supermarket or off-licence to pick up a bottle. In many places these bottles are not just arranged as varieties of red or white but also by nationality. I have a fondness for some Australian wines.

In order for grapes to grow they need a very particular climate and just the right amount of sun and rain. The vines themselves need a lot of care and attention, growing in rich soil and requiring plenty of pruning and cutting. When harvest comes the rewards are great, with beautiful bunches of grapes, some of which are transformed into sweet-tasting wines. Things can go wrong because of the soil make-up or adverse weather and the disappointment can lead to despair, or great despondency and even financial ruin, because all that hard work has been for nothing.

While we might not fully appreciate how much work is needed to maintain a good vineyard we can all understand what it feels like to be disappointed or despondent. These are things we all experience in our lives. They are source of pain and hurt which sometimes take a long time to fade.

Today's readings let us know of God's pain and disappointment. The people he had placed in his vineyard, the Promised Land, had turned their backs on him. Time and again he sent his prophets to tell them of his love, concern and protection, and instead of listening to them they killed them. In today's parable Jesus forecasts his own death but says his death will not be in vain. Although he will be rejected by God's Chosen People, he will be the keystone of belief for many future generations.

This tells us that God can bring about a triumph out of any disaster. We may hurt him by our sinfulness but he never gives up. He is always trying to break through to us with that same message of love. Move over, today's readings show us just how much God understands us because they tell us his has the capacity to feel the same way we do and he still cares for us. Sometimes we hear a lot of how we can offend God, but maybe we should change the word "offend" to "hurt". I believe that would be a more accurate description of how we can treat God. Jesus tells us that no matter what difficult or painful situation we may find ourselves in God will understand, whether that situation is the betrayal of infidelity within a broken marriage with its bitterness and division, or the desolation of a bereavement, the emptiness of unemployment or the heartbreak of wayward children.

We can often feel that in these times God is very distant and it can be very difficult to pray, but bringing our brokenness to him can be in itself a prayer. It is also very important to maintain a prayer life when things are going smoothly so we will be strengthened and assured of God's loving presence when things are rocky. We must be prepared to take in the words of Christ and others pieces of scripture and store them in our hearts and minds so that in hard times we can draw on them and receive the comfort and guidance we need. This is what our Blessed Mother did and she is one of the sources of information that evangelists used when writing the Gospels. I mention this because today is the memorial of the Our Lady of the Rosary and the Rosary is described as praying the Gospel on our knees.

To be open to God's guidance is also vital because very often, the pain we experience is a result of our own actions when we fail to live as he has directed us in the Scriptures and the

Commandments. This can require perseverance and sacrifice but these will lead to conversion and will reduce our anxiety and fear of the future. Then, as St Paul tells us there will be no need to worry and we will pray for what we need rather than striving selfishly to attain what we want. To focus exclusively on what we want can very often lead to us to disregard the hurt we may cause God and others when we eventually attain them.

We must make Jesus the keystone of our lives. If we do this we will be standing on solid ground and be able to withstand any of life's storms. In many ways we have our own garden or vineyard to tend and that is our relationship with God. Any relationship needs all concerned to work to make it develop and improve. It requires honesty and fidelity but we will not be working alone. God's grace will be there to support and encourage us. He always lives up to his side of the agreement involved in the relationship we have with him.

The rewards of our labours will be great and beyond our highest expectations. There will be no chance of our hopes coming to nothing because when we trust in God we will receive the peace that he promised us and we will be able to share it with others and we will also be able to return to him the love that is his due.