

## *The fruitless vineyard*

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*Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-15 (page 307); Philippians 3; Matthew 21:33-46*

What a relief to have had some rain over the last couple of days! The impact of climate change is evident in the increasing dryness of this continent, and all around us we are confronted by issues relating to our care of the environment. During last week, Prof Garnaut, the Govt's climate change adviser, produced his final report. It was pre-empted, however, by 16 climate scientists writing to the PM urging him to take tougher action than the official report would advise. "There is no time to lose", they warned. One of the scientists said, "We are deciding now what the future climate will be at the end of this century. The question about acting now is really important. The cost of procrastinating is at the heart of this problem". What will be left for future generations if there is a failure to act responsibly now? Imagine the sense of regret, indeed devastation, there would be if the created order disintegrates more and more and no longer produces the abundance of beauty and fruitfulness that has been known and experienced.

It is that depth of regret, indeed devastation, said the OT prophet Isaiah, that God felt about the people at that time. In the first reading, we heard the song of the vineyard - so full, even bold, in its imagery. In it, God appears as the steadfast lover, who devotes great care to his vineyard, the Hebrew people. The recapitulation of all that the lover did for his vineyard does give the hearer some idea of the patience and sense of purpose with which God tended the people throughout their history. But the main theme of this song is judgement. It is a song that deserves special attention, for in both the OT and the NT (as in Gospel), the image of the fruitful/fruitless vineyard is one of the major metaphors for the people of God.

This passage in Isaiah is a very striking one. It is a reproach and a warning cast in the form of a parable and culminating in the interpretation of the parable. At the same time it is introduced like a popular ballad. Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard. The opening verses have the sprightly rhythm of a song. The vintage festivals were times of feasting and singing, and Isaiah here adopts the role of the ballad singer with a new song. So, he beguiles the attention of those who might otherwise not have given him a hearing. Isaiah displays an astonishing versatility in his methods of teaching — an acted parable, a sign-board, a costume. He employs anything that will make his word articulate and visible: so here he uses one of the oldest human ploys — he sings a song.

The occasion when the prophet addressed his song-parable to the people of Jerusalem was, in all probability, one of the great gatherings at the Temple to celebrate the Feast following the harvest, when the people flocked to the city and the temple to celebrate the wonder of life and the gift of harvest. Vintage songs were in the air, and the crowd would listen with interest as the well-known prophet began to sing such a song.

But as used by Isaiah, the song turns out to be not a song of joy, but a lament. Thus the poet/prophet begins by singing for his 'beloved' a 'love song' concerning his vineyard. But who is the beloved? And where is the vineyard? At first, the song invites a judgement from the hearers about a vineyard that was a failure in producing grapes for wine. Then, subtly, the poet shifts the accent to "my vineyard", hinting that he is not speaking literally, but metaphorically. And it is unclear to whom the "I" and the "my" refer: to a vine-grower, to the singer, to someone else. Before this ambiguity is resolved, the decision is announced that the vine-grower has decided to uproot the vineyard and convert the land to a waste. Only in the

last line does everything become clear. God is the one who planted the vineyard, and the vineyard is God's own people.

So the great prophet sang his song. It is a clever song: it paints a picture, elicits a sympathetic response, asks a question, and leaves the hearers condemned by their own answer. By it Isaiah indirectly, but clearly, confronts his people with the incredible pains God had taken for them and God's expectation that they would respond to love. But they betrayed God's trust; they returned evil for God's good: they had been like a vineyard that had yielded wild grapes.

The same message of unfaithfulness is there in today's gospel parable, where the same image of the vineyard is used. The parable begins with a paraphrase of God's love song concerning his vineyard, from Isaiah: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. It is God's love song for God's people. The religious leaders, to whom Jesus told it, would all know the cast. But the point on which the parable turns is the identity of the tenant farmers — that's the point that provides the sting and the offence.

You can imagine, as Jesus began his parable, that the religious leaders settled back to hear once again a favourite and familiar story, a story about Israel and God's salvation, a story in which they had a privileged position. But as the story developed, it took on an unexpected twist. The leaders failed to identify themselves with particular characters in the story - until the end, when they realised that they had been cast as the villains, that in failing to hear Jesus, as they had failed to hear the prophets, they were failing to hear what God was saying to them. The parable was another appeal by Jesus to them to open their eyes and ears to God - hard as it was, to acknowledge that just maybe they were wrong.

And what was the problem? It was the problem of our human autonomy. The landowner sent servants to the tenant farmers to collect the produce, but they refused to hand over what was rightly the landowner's. They would keep it for themselves. But more than that, they wanted not just the fruit but the vineyard itself, and they would kill to get it. They wanted for themselves what was God's.

And what is Matthew's point? This story is our story. Matthew writes for his readers so they/we can look at ourselves and see if we are producing the fruit that is part of being God's people. And the warning is: to fail to produce fruit is to cease to live the life of faith. It is to stop responding to God and that is to kill God's life in us.

It is part of our human nature to be those tenant farmers. We want life on our terms, with things being for me and working out for me as I want it. It is the sense of autonomy, of being God and the centre of the universe. It is an illusion, and we spend most of our lives trying to prop up the illusion in what we do and in our relationships. It is what prevents us from producing the fruit of Christ-likeness. Even our religious life can become just another expression of our autonomy that keeps God at a distance, controlled. It is what has made us complacent about the environment. That complacency is largely a spiritual issue.

It is interesting that the first creation story in Genesis ends with God resting. There is no aiming for maximum output such as dominates western thinking; enough is enough. Unceasing and limitless production was never part of the vision. Rather, knowing when to stop is part of revelation, and the Sabbath commandment includes human activity in God's pattern of work and rest. Sabbath is about refreshment, nurture and getting things in perspective again. It helps us guard against greed and not to get so consumed with work we lose sight of other things — especially the spiritual side of us.

St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says that the first role of the Spirit-filled person is to release creation from 'futility', and help restore it to its purpose of peace, well-being, and praise. This commits us to new ways of living: not the ways of the world and consumerism,

but ways that enable life for other people and for the creation. And this is particularly the case when it is the poorest and most vulnerable people in the human community, who are most affected by it.

The Bible is a story of God's generosity in creation and re-creation. As Christians read it, the stories of creation form the beginning and end of the Bible and they are stories of wild outpourings of God's love and goodness: one in the creation itself; one in Jesus Christ. The author of the Fourth Gospel understands all things coming to be through the divine, creative Word, that we encounter — enfleshed/incarnated — in Jesus. This is the faith in which all our environmental concerns must be grounded.

The bishops at the recent Lambeth Conference recognised environmental concerns as a top priority for Christian people. They urged each local congregation to position itself as a symbol for ecological commitment to sustaining and renewing God's creation. And the steps can be simple — like plant one tree, walk or cycle whenever you can.

When we work to protect and care for creation we witness to God and God's love for all God has made and we become workers with God in the earth's renewal. And we do it by the lives we lead, committed more to simplicity than consumption — by the way we work and play, conserving the good gifts God gives us — by our political and environmental involvements, speaking up for the earth that otherwise has no voice — and by our prayer because we know we need to be opened to God the creator.

In writing his gospel, Matthew placed great emphasis on producing fruits (faithfulness), confronting his readers with the question, "are you being faithful?" Just because they had accepted Christ, they had no room for complacency. There was the on-going call to faithfulness — to justice and righteousness.

Matthew used the parable we have heard today to present us with the need to be constantly listening for God — constantly, whatever life brings, to be listening, hearing, responding, opening ourselves to new insights and allowing God to challenge and correct and re-direct us. And it is crucial that whatever we learn of God, we live.

So, if we are trying to take in the gospel story, we must treat it as a word addressed to God's people at all times — to us — and one that will shake us out of any complacency and force us to respond to God's call to faithfulness, by permitting ourselves to be totally gripped by the gospel message of Jesus Christ.