

An Address by Bill Pattinson at St David's Church – 4th October 2020

Trinity 17 and the Feast of St Francis

The Vineyards of our Lives: Matthew 21:33-end; Isaiah 5:1-7:

I love this time of year, so full of a great variety of weather, colour and winter preparations. To my utter surprise and pleasure there are so many fresh buds still on our Lady of Shallot rose. God's bounty seems never ending. Thus I find myself driving along the Exe valley road quoting aloud to myself the opening lines of Keats' classic poem "Ode to Autumn":

"Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run."

Not that we see today many vines around thatch-eaves. Yet the sight of a full, rich harvest of grapes on the slopes of a vineyard is wonderfully aesthetic, the result of so much joint endeavour. You may know Van Gogh's great painting "The Red Vineyard", apparently the only painting he sold in his lifetime. The canvas reveals the mellow tones and the glistening light of an evening's harvest as the sun sets in a vineyard at Arles in the Rhône Valley, where one of my favourite red wines, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, meaning the Pope's new castle, is produced. The painting celebrates Autumn. What joy in both harvest and glass!

The Bible is rich in the imagery of the vineyard and wine. We read in Genesis how Adam was put in the Garden of Eden "to till it and keep it." The Garden was a place of fruitfulness, productivity and gladness until the fall. We can assume that there was a vineyard and a wine press, built and planted, as we heard in our first reading from Isaiah, with God's tender care, with his intimate involvement, with his meticulousness, with his devoted yet fierce love. God's vineyard, in this reading, represents the Israelites, who just like Adam and Eve turned away from God, worshipping false idols and being inattentive to his ways. So the grapes turned sour and the wine harvest was bitter, full of bloodshed. God's love for his vineyard was unrequited by his own people and his judgement was swift and powerful.

Isaiah's song of the unfruitful vineyard leads us seamlessly into Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants, which we heard in our Gospel Reading. There are many similarities. Jesus is in his last week. The 1% of his life to which Belinda referred last Sunday, that week of suffering, betrayal and death. Following his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he has cleansed the temple of ungodly acts; his authority has been questioned by the chief priests and Pharisees. All around are listening to him, yes, even those chief priests and Pharisees. Indeed to the credit of the Temple leaders they understand the meaning of Jesus' parable. They recognise themselves as the wicked tenants of the vineyard. They realise that the parable is a critique of the leaders of Israel, especially the temple leadership. No wonder they sought his arrest.

The landowner is God, who plants and builds his vineyard, his Kingdom, just as carefully as we heard in Isaiah. It was common in those days to lease out such places to tenants, so there would be no surprise in this to the listeners. The slaves who come to collect the produce represent the early

prophets, who are mistreated and even killed by the tenants. Now if the landowner, in those days, died without an heir then the land would go to the tenants. So, on seeing the Son of the owner coming, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him just as, later in the week, Jesus would be thrown out of Jerusalem and crucified.

Jesus seems to confront the scribes and Pharisees time and time again. He doesn't give up on them. Despite abusing God's gift of the vineyard and his love, he wants them to see the error of their ways. And so he persists with us, never condemning us but rather recovering us. We are all welcome in the Kingdom of God. We will be excluded from the Kingdom only by our own actions. God will never give up on us. Yet Jesus says:

"...the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the Kingdom."

And how can we produce the fruits of the Kingdom? By following in Jesus' steps. By recognising he is the cornerstone, the major vine, in the vineyard of our lives. So what is the quality of our grapes, the fruits of the Kingdom, in the vineyard which God has given to each one of us? It is the heart of Christ which reveals these fruits. What do we see growing there - love, intimacy, mercy, forgiveness, justice, generosity, compassion, truth, healing, joy, thanksgiving, peace, obedience and humility. These are the lived realities in the vineyards of our lives. So how are our grapes ripening? What do we see? Is there life? Are we being good tenants? Are we sharing in God's Kingdom? Are we producing a rich harvest - a wine of love?

Most noticeable in Van Gogh's canvas of "The Red Vineyard" are the bent backs of the grape pickers. Good harvests rely on combined efforts of hard work, which is not always what we may wish to do. So it is in God's vineyard of our Church. In order for us to produce the fruits of the Kingdom here in our Parish of St David's we must all work together. We have God's gifts to help us, our own talents. We are all called to be good tenants. We are so fortunate that Ash and Belinda in their callings, with their gifts are now ministering with us. We give thanks also for the ministries of Charlotte and Howard who renewed their licences as Readers to this Parish yesterday morning. So what is God calling you to do now, here, in this Church, in this Parish? At our Annual meeting later this month we are seeking a Church Warden for St David's, a Chapel Warden for St Michael's and PCC members. Is this something to which you could bend your back and bear fruit? Please pray that people will come forward.

The grapes may have been ripened and picked, the harvest gathered in and the summer past yet the vineyards of our country, of our world are withstanding great storms - an expected second wave of the pandemic perhaps leading to further lockdowns, climate change, sustainability problems, animal and plant extinction, remembering that today we celebrate the Feast of St Francis, the patron saint of animals, and always there is the possibility of winter storms. It appears there has never been a more appropriate time to thank God for the joy of his gift of love, his vineyard, knowing we can rely on his Providence trusting all of us will play our roles as good tenants. By this will our harvest be rich and the taste of the New Wine delicious.