

27th Sunday; Cycle

(Isa 5:1-7; Phil 4:6-9; Matt 21:33-43)

Since our first reading and the gospel feature parables, let us start by asking, “What are parables all about?” We know that the Scriptures, the gospels in particular, are full of them. They are Jesus’ favorite technique for getting His teaching across. We probably think of parables as homey little stories, lifelike but probably fictional, intended to teach a religious truth. How many would agree with that definition? I suspect that those who didn’t raise their hands think there may be a trap of some sort. Actually, that is a good definition; it’s just that in many cases, it doesn’t tell the whole story.

This would be an accurate definition for the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, for example, because there the Lord Himself explains the point of the story: the humble Publican, who begs for mercy, goes home forgiven, justified before the Lord, while the proud Pharisee goes home unchanged; he came a braggart and goes home a braggart.

But often the parable calls for a judgment. Last Sunday, for example, in the parable of the two sons, the hearers are asked “Which of the sons did what the father wanted?” Or in the case of the Good Samaritan, “Which one was a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” In fact, a parable is often a ploy used in a debate, a way of forcing someone to come to an admission that he/she would

not willingly make. That is why the real issue is disguised as a fictional story; we are not put on our guard. But once the story forces us to make a judgment, the point of the parable is made, and you may find yourself impaled upon it.

With all this in mind, let us go back to the story Isaiah tells us in today's first reading. To begin with, he acts as though he is not speaking in his own name, but tells the experience of another; and even this other is anonymous—"my friend," "my beloved." This friend, it seems, has planted a vineyard and done everything humanly possible to make it the very best. Yet the result, the crop of grapes, is very disappointing; instead of good grapes, it yielded "rotten grapes" (more accurately than the 'wild grapes' of our lectionary). The hearers (now specified as "inhabitants of Jerusalem, people of Judah") are asked to render judgment: what could the owner have done that he did not do? Why did it bring forth rotten grapes instead of good grapes? The answer is that nothing more could have been done; the only explanation is perversity on the part of the vineyard. He doesn't ask them what the punishment should be, but tells them: destruction. When he says he will "command the clouds not to rain upon it," he begins to tip his hand, for this is something only God can do. He throws away all pretense when he says, "the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, the people of Judah, his cherished plant."

This opens the door to further interpretation. Although our lectionary reading does not have "beloved,"

the term appears, along with “friend” in Isaiah’s Hebrew. “Beloved” (*dod*) also appears frequently in the Song of Songs; “vineyard” also appears there as a metaphorical term for the “beloved.” In this way Isaiah both conceals (initially) that he is speaking of Yahweh and gives a personal dimension to the betrayal (in the term “beloved”).

But Isaiah doesn’t leave us in doubt as to what sort of betrayal is involved. Isaiah specifies: “He looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!” The picture is of a poor man who has lost all, perhaps though a judge bribed by a rich man. The poor man or widow has lost everything and has no recourse except to scream out his/her despair. This is the “outcry” the Lord hears in the city. For Isaiah, social justice is a supreme demand, a demand he sets forth in every way he can, including a parable such as this.

Isaiah’s composition is obviously the great granddaddy of Jesus’ parable of today, but much has been added. In each case there is the same careful work of the “landowner,” the same disappointment in terms of the produce. But now the poignancy is greater because now the owner sends his own son, whom they murder. And now we see allegorical features, as the “landowner” is clearly God and “his son” is Jesus Christ. Again, the threat that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will bear its fruit,” can easily be taken to refer to the Gentiles and the Jews.

So what do we do about these parables? They are fictional stories, so we can ignore them? Right? Wrong!

They may be fictional, but they are true. Israel of the OT neglected justice, as the prophets tell us. Their wall was thrown down, their city destroyed, as history tells us. Israel of the NT rejected the Son of God and their kingdom was taken from them, as history tells us. The unforgiving servant will not be forgiven, as the final days will tell us. The word of God may not literally be seed nor we literally be ground, but if we let the devil snatch it away from us, if we let cares and luxury choke it off, we will be fruitless. The servant who did not employ to good use the talents given him will lose everything. The servant put in charge of the Master's household who carouses and mistreats others, will certainly be dismissed. Some bridesmaids will be prepared and some will not be and will accordingly either be admitted or excluded from the kingdom. And remember, you know not the day of the hour; the Son of Man will come like thief in the night.

So let us attend to the parables, try to understand them, but above all, let us believe and act on them. They were Our Lord's favorite medium for teaching. Anyone who thinks he/she can take them lightly will certainly have to give an accounting to Our Lord, as so many of His parables warn us.