

Homily- Roger Ludin – 10-8-23

The theme running through the lessons for the past few weeks has been grapes and vineyards. Today is no exception. The Old Testament, Psalm and Gospel all have these as central themes. Maybe we should have read an Aesop Fable about Sour Grapes today, as well. But each lesson stresses something different.

Let's start with Isaiah. This is a song sung to his "Beloved". The Beloved sets up a perfect vineyard on fertile ground, dug it out and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He added a watchtower, hedges and a wine vat. He sat back and expected marvelous results. However, he ended up with wild sour grapes which could not be consumed. It is like the Peter, Paul and Mary recording (written by Will Holt) "Lemon tree very pretty and the lemon flower is sweet, but the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat." One question here, if he planted choice vines how could he end up with wild grapes. That is like planting Chardonnay grapes and ending up with Cabernet! We live in a renowned wine region, and I have yet to hear of grapes going bad. Some years the yield and quality will vary and not be as good, but they are still quality. As the Godfather of Paso Vintners, Gary Eberly, once said, "you have to work hard to produce a bad wine here." So yesterday I took a field trip to find out. He is right.

The Beloved was angry decided to tear down the hedges and walls and let the wild animals consume and trample the vines, and commanded that no rain is to fall upon it. This is the Old Testament vengeful God. He is declaring that the people of Jerusalem and Judah are his pleasant planting. He gave them everything to be desired, and yet they turned out unthankful and ungrateful. He expected Justice and got bloodshed. Their easy life will turn difficult as he turns away from them. Justice demands economic and legal fairness. All people should have access to enough to live on. God worked hard for good grapes (i.e. people) and was disappointed with the harvest of inferior grapes.

The psalm tells a similar story, but from the people's side. They say he brought the vine (them) out of Egypt and planted it. He prepared the ground for it, it took root and filled the land. Now they are asking why he tore down the walls so it could be ravaged. Why has he deserted them? Where are You? Please Lord come back and tend your vines. Their God, whom they adored and worshiped is MIA. Where is the God who protected them and provided abundance of good things in life? Maybe, they didn't get the message from Isaiah who was showing God's side. They are pleading for God's return and for Him to look down from heaven and tend the vine. Preserve what Your right hand has planted. They are pleading for themselves, rather than offering to do something to please their god.

The Gospel continues the vineyard theme. Last week, Jesus was confronted by the chief priests and Pharisees about where his authority to preach came from and he handed them a real poser and set back. Today they are at it again and in true Jesus style he retreats into telling another parable. A landowner, planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, built a watchtower and wine press. He leased it to tenants to take care of and left. This was a common practice in those days, the rich had the land, leased it out for people to do all the work, and in return wanted their share. Was it a fair or greedy share we don't know, but in this parable, he seemed to be a good landlord. At harvest time, he sent his slaves to collect his share. The tenants beat them and sent them away. The landowner sent more slaves who were beaten and killed, the tenants sending a "nah, nah, nah" and thumbed the nose at the landowner. The landowner then sent his son, who he was sure they would respect, and in their greed they killed him, expecting to get his inheritance, i.e. "their" land. Jesus infers in no way that this was a dumb, or rash move by the landowner, but his audience did. He asks the high priests what should be done, and they as one say he should come with troops, evict them, and replace them with new tenants who would be loyal to him. The chief priests and Pharisees were sure they had the gotcha moment and knew the answer. BUT – At this point, Jesus goes to his other back pocket argument (did they have back pockets then?) and pulls out lines from Psalm 118. "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." And then goes on "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces." (Wow, I want to sing that aria from the Messiah, "He will smash them to pieces" which comes just before the Alleluia Chorus)

At this point the chief guys realized that he was talking about THEM as the tenants. The gotcha moment evaporated. They had seen themselves as the landowners, which many were in actuality, but were schlonked to realize that they were cast as the tenants. They wanted to arrest Jesus right then and there, but were afraid of the crowds.

The other interpretation is that God is the landowner. The slaves that were sent over the centuries were the prophets. They were not wildly accepted, undergoing all sorts of torture. He sent many Prophets, and they received not spectacular welcoming parties when they came to town, just the opposite. So, he sent more prophets. Again, and again.

So as a loving God, he sent his son! This gospel story was close to the end of Matthew's narrative of Jesus life and within a few chapters we will have the passion narrative. Jesus knew at this point what was in store.

The difference between the Isaiah story and Mathew's is that Isaiah's version is a breakdown in product, while Matthew's is a breakdown in delivery. In Isaiah, the people were the bad grapes and were unjust to one another. In Matthew, the grapes were fine, but the tenants were greedy and wanted to have it all.

I read a headline on line recently that said the many Christians are shocked to learn the Jesus was woke! It was one of those articles that if you didn't read it then you will never find it again, so I missed the article. However, most mainline churches preach that Jesus cares for and recognized the downtrodden and bids us to help them.

I'm sure the article was referring to Evangelicals. To call them Evangelical Christians is an oxymoron. In Matthew 25 Jesus says "for I was hungry and you fed me, was thirsty and you gave me drink, was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me, was sick and you visited me." Sister Greta referred to this passage in her sermon two weeks ago. The Evangelical leaders are our present day chief priests and Pharisees. They are preaching to hate those who are different from us, who don't believe like we do, get rid of all immigration – no strangers, get rid of medicare and medicaid – we shouldn't pay to heal the sick - welfare, the downtrodden are just lazy, social security – because. Let us have our glorious expensive churches which we will not open up to the displaced in times of disaster (Floods, hurricanes) - until we are shamed into it and do it reluctantly. These leaders are the tenant farmers Jesus was referring to in today's gospel.

I am proud to be a member of a woke St. Peter's by the Sea. We are not rich, but we do a lot of outreach. Our weekly food basket for the Salvation Army (which should be overflowing every week - Hint, Hint!). Prado Meals, the weekly Morro Bay Vets Hall meals (which we, St Peter's, not only serve monthly but fund the program under our umbrella insurance policy so they can exist,) and we give away \$5000 a year to local charitable causes. Our sign outside says "All are welcome" and I hope we never change. Amen