

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time - October 8, 2023

From where I was standing the entire world appeared to be a vineyard.

Four years ago, this week, I was standing in the middle of the Rioja region of Spain, famous for its Tempranillo and Grenache grapes, into which Rioja wine is made. All around me, in a 360-degree panoramic view which extended to the distant horizon over the lush rolling hills of Rioja, I saw nothing but vineyards. As an added bonus, it was harvest season and the harvest workers, noticing our curiosity, invited us to join them. So, we pilgrims—Fr. Tony Neusch and I—briefly became workers of the harvest and were each rewarded with a bunch of absolutely delicious grapes.

When praying over today's readings, in which vineyards are prominently referenced, I couldn't but help visualize that scene from my pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago.

Today's reading from the beginning of Isaiah's prophetic ministry to Israel is known as "The Song of the Vineyard." With this poem, Isaiah attempts to get the attention of the people of Israel and to dissuade them of their increasingly unjust practices toward God and toward each other. Isaiah's parable tells of a "friend" who, with great care, lovingly plants a vineyard. In spite of all of his "friend's" love and attention, the resulting harvest yields nothing but "rotten grapes." The vineyard was then good for nothing, but to be torn down and trampled underfoot. At the end of this passage, Isaiah leaves no doubt about the meaning of this parable with his concluding sentence, which is echoed in the refrain of the responsorial psalm:

The vineyard of the Lord... is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished plant; he looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! for justice, but hark, the outcry!

This call to repentance by Isaiah and other prophets was ultimately unsuccessful and eventually resulted in the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile. However, this passage is more than just an oracle of condemnation. Notice, in the concluding sentence that I just read, that "the people of Judah" are referred to as "[the Lord's] cherished plant;" Isaiah is reassuring Israel that God will never abandon his people, thereby giving hope for the future.

A vineyard is also the setting of Jesus' parable in today's gospel. In fact, this is the third week in a row where Jesus' parables from the Gospel of St. Matthew take place in a vineyard. In this parable, Jesus uses a vineyard to relate the history of Israel.

The owner of an estate leases it out to tenant farmers and then goes on a long journey. This was particularly common in Galilee where landowners often lived outside of the territory. Generally, the rent was for a certain percentage of the harvest from the vineyard while the

tenants were able to keep what remained. The owner would then send servants to collect the part of the harvest that was his.

However, in this parable, the tenants choose not to pay the owner; they abuse and kill the owner's servants, which parallels what the historic leaders of Israel did to many of the prophets that God sent to them over the centuries. Likewise, we're told that the tenants killed the owner's son, which foretells the death of Jesus at the hands of the Pharisees and elders, the current religious leaders of Israel.

At this point, Jesus asks the Pharisees and the elders, "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants...?" They, the Pharisees and the elders, give a self-condemning proclamation which Jesus turns on them. Quoting psalm 118, Jesus tells the Pharisees and the elders that he, Jesus, is the stone, rejected by them, but is the cornerstone of the vineyard, the kingdom of God, which will be taken away from them and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

Why was Jesus so intolerant with the Pharisees and the elders?

The role of the Old Testament prophets was not only to decry the present and to foretell the future, they proposed alternative ways of caring and responding to the presence of God. Just like the tenants of the vineyard, who killed the prophets in order to protect their place in society, the Pharisees and the elders at the time of Jesus, were holding tightly to their lofty status as religious leaders by concentrating on the external behaviors and actions of the people. They developed detailed legal traditions that were ascribed, not to Scripture, but, to "the traditions of the fathers." While faithful men, they perceived their role to be watchmen of legal traditions rather than tenants charged with the harvest by helping others grow in the faith and become closer to God. Jesus was critical of their focus on external religious practices at the expense of interior spiritual dispositions.

So what is the fruit of the harvest that God is looking for?

Today's readings give us insight into God's desire for the harvest:

- In Isaiah, God desires repentance, right judgment and justice.
- In the responsorial psalm, we're charged to call upon the name of the Lord, in prayer.
- In the letter of St. Paul to the Philippians, we're called to "keep on doing what [we] have learned and received and heard" from the Lord's gospel of love; we're to be true, virtuous and to be at peace with our trust in the Lord.

After this Mass, we will continue our life's pilgrimage in the vineyard, that is the world. What will you do to help with the harvest?