

19/08/2007

Isaiah 5:1 – 7

Psalm 80

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

Luke 12:49 – 56

The song of the vineyard

Isaiah's love song about a garden is a picture of the relationship between the people of God and their Creator, which quickly develops into a parable of judgment. Anyone who loves gardening will appreciate the commitment and care the gardener expressed in preparing the ground, establishing the vineyard and building the watchtower and wine press. Nothing more could have been done. It was a pleasant planting and a good crop was joyfully expected, but it was not forthcoming. When the waiting was over, the vineyard produced wild grapes. The word used translates literally as *stinkers*: rotten things, which are offensive and useless. God as the distressed Vignerone is puzzled. After so much positive input and care in search of good fruit, how did this happen? And what are stinkers? The Prophet tells us they were unethical practices of injustice and violence, which robbed others of life and hope. These deeds reveal Israel had given up seeking to honor God's faithful, hopeful, life giving acts towards it, and no longer lived justly. Instead of protecting life and caring for the weak the people had gone over to bloodshed and exploitation. They had lost the key to their life, and because the vineyard no longer fulfilled its owner's purpose, they would have to live without grace. The hedge and wall that ensured its existence and protected its life was to be removed leaving the vineyard vulnerable to the forces that plunder, choke and destroy. Judgment is pronounced, but the mood is sorrowful, more than angry, for ultimately God's will is that the people should live.

Israel's exile into Babylon became the distressing calamity Isaiah warned about. The land was trampled and burned, and the ability to worship was choked. In response to such an event the Psalm cries to the Lord of Hosts to turn his face to the people, and again cherish the vine of his planting. They seek restoration and promise faithfulness. If we read the two texts together, it could be said that the breaking down, trampling and burning of the vineyard was a purifying gesture, a judgment, which brought the people to their senses. But the restoration they now sought meant God had to have a change of heart. A new act of grace was needed.

It is difficult to face the judgment of these words and, reluctant as we would be to make a direct connection between the waywardness of a people and an historical outcome, we know there is danger in being distracted from our true mission as the people of God. And we know how, ironically, peace rarely comes without conflict, no salvation without a sifting of the wheat from the chaff, and no redemption without the choosing of a way. We know this to be true right across our lives. We can see we have to decide what to do about climate change, nationally, personally and globally, and likely as not we shall finally will to do what is needed when we have been badly burned or face total loss. The same applies to the state of our rivers and their need for conservation. And we agonize over what is happening in Aboriginal communities,

and the real agenda behind the Government's present strategy. We know it will cost much more suffering before a way is found that leads to life. It burns us up to think about it, and it will burn us if we don't.

God's presence as fire, at work to cleanse and purify, is indicated in our readings today. In the Gospel Jesus is a hell fire preacher who utters a hard saying: *I have come to bring fire to the earth.* The Prince of Peace has embarked on a distressful baptism of fire, a prophetic mission that is increasingly fraught with controversy and peril. Who he is and what he does precipitated a crisis: it caused people to decide which way is the way to life: a choice so radical it had the power to break up a family and set the members against one another. Recall how, at his presentation in the Temple, Simeon said to Mary and Joseph: *this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...* Even his parents would suffer because of him (2:34-35). And remember that John the Baptist said of Jesus that he would Baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Jesus takes the crowd to task because, although they can recognize the weather patterns, they seem incapable of discerning deeper truths about the challenge he is putting before them. They are unable to see where the lines of the faith questions fall in their time. They cannot recognize that he lived to demonstrate what life looks like when it is systematically exposed to the story of God's grace. The challenge he brought and the healing he demonstrated signaled that the negative, enslaving spirit of the age was being put to flight. For this he was resisted to the death. That is why there is a natural link between fire he casts on the earth, and the sign of the cross. His journey to the cross ignited something that created division between those amongst whom it was kindled. This did not seem like peace, because it opened a time of decision and judgment for those whom he confronted. Some continued in the way of creating stinkers, living lives of violence and injustice, while others chose to be grafted into the vine that bore a rich harvest of positive things. The difference is that life with him breaks the inherent self-seeking of the human spirit – a pattern that seems like life to us but is in fact death. Life with him grafts us into the life that is the source of all.

In these terms then, the challenge for the Church is to be aware of two things. That it is God's people, and the quality of the life within the vineyard is important. Also the people of God have a role in the greater vineyard of the world. If the church as vineyard it is to bear good fruit, it must maintain the sort of disciplines that keep it related to the source of its life. This means looking always to the one who leads it, and whose will in bringing the fire of decision within its borders is that it should not be distracted by the conflicts and seductions of the time, but ever choose the pilgrim way of its founder, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And we do this, not for the sake of preserving the church, or satisfying our own needs. But because by this we turn away from death dealing acts to live in a community shaped by the acceptance and justice he brings. This translates into lives that are not marked by bloodshed, injustice and exploitation (Stinkers!). But lives that are marked by the same type of hospitality, faithfulness and community that he himself embodied and created. To live this way is to live in a fruitful vineyard. By this, souls are made not lost, hope is kindled and death is transformed into life.