

Sermon for Evensong on Palm Sunday, 14th April 2019

Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 20:1-9 - see

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=422101380> - Vineyards

I have a nice friend who has a house in the South of France. That's not the only thing that makes him a nice friend! Until he sold it off, the house had a vineyard. It's the nearest that I've got to understanding what it's like to own and manage a vineyard. As far as I can tell, the modern way, for the visiting expat, is to join a cooperative, which provides the labourers in the vineyard, harvests the grapes and turns them into delicious wine. All that the heroic expat has to do is to have bought the vineyard in the first place and then to agree to contribute his harvest of grapes in return for a certain allowance of the finished wine – a sort of current account in wine. I think that the image of the current account is perhaps apt because I know my friend was frequently overdrawn, but nobody really seemed to mind. Unfortunately, in the end he did sell out, to the cooperative, so no more current account. He had to go and buy wine just like anyone else.

I don't think that the people employed by the cooperative to harvest my friend's vineyard were like the wicked husbandmen in our New Testament lesson. So far as I know, they didn't lie in wait for my friend and his family, to do them in, so that in some way they could acquire title to his vineyard. And come to think of it also, certainly for me as a fairly regular visitor, there was never any issue about whether the vineyard was going to be productive. Every year the vines duly produced a fine harvest of grapes.

Those of you who know me well will realise that I'm not very good on nature. I'm bit shaky where the subject matter concerned doesn't develop 285 bhp from its six cylinders in a V formation, and where its 'look' is determined by the sun on a hillside rather than by the metalworking skills of a craftsman in Turin. Be that as it may, I think that whoever chose to have us read these two

passages together in the evening of Palm Sunday wasn't really interested in wine-growing. The passages are meant to illustrate truths about God, and the New Testament one is an illustration about the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The vineyard in Isaiah's prophecy points to something like the fall of man, Adam and Eve; God in his infinite bounty being like 'my dearly beloved' in his garden. He did everything to plant the vineyard expertly and to nurture it, only to find that the vines didn't take properly and didn't produce the fruit that he reasonably expected, after all the trouble that he had put in.

It's almost as though the vines had a mind of their own, and the allegory is even clearer in the story from St Luke's gospel. God sends the prophets one by one, but the prophets are without honour in their own country and one by one they get done in. And then he sends his own son, and they do him in as well. That's Jesus, and Jesus points out that actions have consequences. Although the wicked husbandmen may have thought that they had got away with depriving the man of his vineyard, nevertheless they will come to a sticky end.

In our Lent course on Wednesday and Thursday, we were beginning to consider Jesus's last days, and somebody asked the really good question, 'Why did Jesus have to die?' In those days people believed that God, or if you were a Greek, the gods on Mount Olympus, needed to be kept sweet. They needed to receive sacrifices. People needed to give things up and to give the things that they had given up to God.

So they would slaughter animals on the altars of the temple and cook the meat, making a delicious meal, and then just leave it for God. Of course the Jews, being very methodical, worked out that it was not a good idea just to leave the sacrifice there but eventually the priests and the Levites got to eat what had been

offered in sacrifice. There is discussion in the New Testament in St Paul's letters [e.g. 1 Corinthians 10:28] about whether it is allowed to eat food which has been offered as a sacrifice and consecrated.

The sacred round was perhaps more clearly understood in those days; that it was important to make sacrifices to God as a propitiation for our sins. Propitiation, making-up for: the idea was that God might be angry with the human race unless they did something to propitiate him, to make things up to him so that he turned away his anger from the sinful people.

But this is challenging for us today. Do we really believe today in the whole mechanism of sacrifice as it was described in the Bible, that giving sacrifices to God are how are you work out a *modus vivendi* with God? Even if we do, the parable of the wicked husbandmen raises as many questions as it might seem to answer.

Is it really the case that a loving God would want to sacrifice his son? Or is it more a question, like it is in the story of the wicked husbandmen, that the loving God allows his son to go among the people on earth, and it is an expression of free will rather than any predetermination by God that results in the killing of the son?

But do we now really understand the mechanism of sacrifice? We have been modelling ourselves on sacrificial observance in Lent by giving up things, making sacrifices, you could say. But somehow it doesn't really resonate, with me at least, that giving up chocolate or beer or talking about Brexit or whatever it is, is actually the same as a sacrifice of living things on an altar was in the old days.

Think of Abraham and his son Isaac in Genesis 22. Abraham trusted God even though God was telling him to kill his own son and 'his obedience was counted to him as righteousness' [Romans

4]. But in the ultimate analysis, he having indicated that he was willing to do the dreadful deed, God let Abraham off; whereas when you get to the New Testament, the sacrifice, the human sacrifice of Jesus, just seems to happen, and the emphasis is more on the consequences.

But perhaps tonight's lessons are not so much about sacrifice as they are about judgement - the Day of Judgement even, at the end of our lives. What will God say, when finally we come up against Him? Will our vineyard bear fruit? Have we been like the bad husbandmen, not caring about the Lord's vineyard and indeed killing off the Messiah in the process?

‘And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard.

What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?’ [Isaiah 5]

The challenge that I think we have to take away tonight may not be like Gardeners' Question Time; it's not a question of seeing whether we are using the right compost to nourish the flower of our belief. Why did Jesus have to die?

Was Jesus, for instance, a sort of human sacrifice? We can understand the idea behind ‘greater love hath no man than that he lay down his life for his friends’ [John 15]. We remember stories like the story of Fr Maximilian Kolbe in Auschwitz in WW2, volunteering to be put to death instead of another prisoner when the Nazis were meting out punishment for an attempted escape.

But if Jesus is the ‘propitiation for our sins’, the scenario is different: what does it suggest to us about God? Is he a fierce, condemning God, who needs to be appeased? Surely not. Or indeed have we misread the story of the wicked husbandmen? Is it

really focused not on Jesus so much as on us: are we like the wicked husbandmen?

We must take time, and reflect. Then we must be open to changing our minds, to repentance. Then, we must pray that God will accept our sacrifices, sacrifices not of animals, but sacrifices of praise. And then, we pray, we will repent and turn away from harm, from doing whatever it is that would make us like those husbandmen, harming God's vineyard.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant