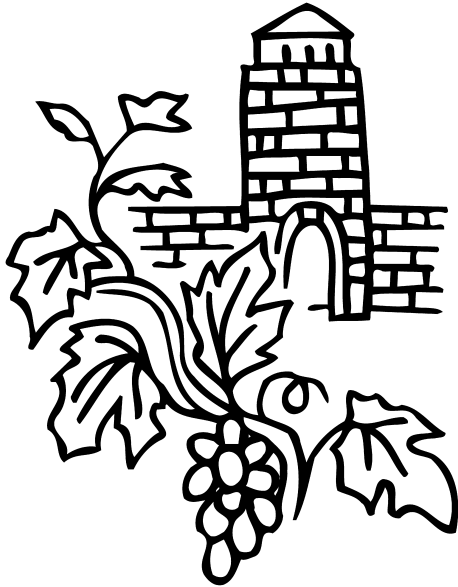


YEAR A - THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

THE HOLY GOSPEL

PENTECOST 16 OCTOBER 2, 2011



The Holy Gospel is according to St. Matthew the 21st Chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus said to the people:

"Listen to another parable. There was a

landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence

around it, dug a wine press

in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. [34] When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. [35] But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. [36] Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. [37] Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' [38] But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' [39] So

they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. [40] Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" [41] They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

[42] Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures:

'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?

[43] Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. [44] The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

[45] When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. [46] They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon - October 2, 2011
Year A - Year of Matthew - Pentecost 16

Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80: 7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Today's gospel is like any clear, simple narrative. In it, Jesus tells us a story; and like all great stories it stays simple and to the point without elaborate detail. The characters are anonymous, and the setting is spare. It is another in a long series of stories told by Jesus, a series that we have been hearing for a few Sundays, and will continue to hear for a few more.

Jesus tells us a story, about an anonymous landowner. At first, it appears to be just another ordinary, unremarkable, simple story.

What we may miss on first hearing is how like Jesus' own personal situation the story is. In this parable, we can imagine the landowner as a metaphor for God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity.

The Creator did a lot more than plant a vineyard, put a fence around it, dig a wine press in it, and build a watchtower; but those images show us some basic truths. God created this earth, and the land on it; God separated the water from the land; God leased the land to people; and God de-

veloped the property, with and through the work of those human hands.

Simple, right? God owns the universe, and we are his tenants or stewards of it.

Then, we look at the history of the Israelites: God sent his holy prophets to his people, and great leaders, and monarchs, people like King David, Moses, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. However, the people did not listen to what the leaders said. They rebelled, sinned, and transgressed the law – again and again and again.

Then, God sent his only son, saying, “They will respect my son.” Up until now, we can imagine this story – and Jesus’ place in it – with no difficulty whatsoever. The landowner’s son, of course, represents Jesus, God’s son. The son, like Jesus, comes to the story after a series of unsuccessful attempts to deliver a message.

However, when Jesus tells this story, he knows – and reveals – something else about himself. Jesus predicts something more profound than his return home. Jesus predicts his death, his murder at the hands of our fellow humans.

Just imagine what it was like to hear Jesus tell this story. Jesus is speaking words that caused anger but also gave hope. They were words that stirred the imaginations of his foes as well as his followers. His foes saw him threatening their way of life, their power and control. His followers heard him speaking of freedom and new life. However, as he said his words, most likely nobody realized he was speaking of his death.

Just imagine how it felt to see him drive out all who were selling and buying in the temple; then, to hear him say, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.” Something new, dramatic, and breathtakingly freeing was happening. However, to the leaders of the temple, they saw the actions of an enemy.

Just imagine what it was like to take part in the great procession from the Mount of Olives, with Jesus riding on a donkey, and the crowds shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” That walk on Palm Sunday was a time of hope, joy, and promise.

Just imagine what it was like to sit and listen to him tell stories – prophetic stories, about himself

and about us – the next morning. That is the setting for this passage from Matthew's Gospel.

Today's Gospel is not about Jesus teaching on a mountainside early in his ministry, or visiting a village to cure the sick. Today's gospel is about Jesus stopping to teach a few days before he went to the cross.

The cross looms over every story and action by Jesus in these passages. Jesus, who knows he has come from the Father and is returning to the Father, tells us his story. Jesus tells us the story in simple, uncomplicated, and ordinary terms. He does this, I suspect, not because he thinks we are unaware. Rather, he tells these stories because he wants to be sure that we do not miss the simplicity of the message.

God has not given up on us. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. In Christ, God continues to reach out to us again and again and again.

God loves us so much that he created us. He made this world for us to live in as his beloved children. God loves us so much that he gave his only son to suffer death upon a cross. God loves

us so much that he made sure that this rejection, this defeat, was not the end of the story. God loves us so much that the end of the story is yet to come, and it is more glorious and wonderful than we can imagine or understand.

God's story and our stories are not over yet. There is still time for change in your life and in mine. There is still time for new plot lines and people.

The story of salvation is not like a fairy tale; it is a story told within the stuff of this life. It is a story told within the messiness that is our lives. It is a story found in human love as well as human suffering and cruelty. The cross was all of these things. It was God bringing forth the story of salvation within the reality of what it is to be human.

The Age of the Enlightenment was an eighteenth century movement that began in France and swept through Europe. It was a movement that was exciting and filled with hope because it thought that through education, the discovery of the scientific method, and the advancement of technology, human war and suffering could be forever overcome. We had risen above human darkness into the enlightenment of human knowledge.

They clearly were wrong. Human nature is a persistent thing. Sin never stops. The great lesson of the Enlightenment was that humans are not able to save themselves. We are people caught in the stuff of our humanity. That is why God revealed himself within the heart of human life, suffering, and death. That is why Jesus tells us these stories as the cross looms near.

Jesus is telling us that he is the foundation, the corner stone; he is the thing upon which the darkness of human nature can finally be freed. To refuse him is to batter one's head against the wall of human sin. To reject him is to remain caught in the emptiness of our mortality. However, to honor him and hear him is to rejoice in being part of the foundation that is God's salvation history won for us by Christ. Amen.