

Grace Episcopal Church
Proper 22, 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev Brian C Justice

Psalm 80.7-14
Isaiah 5.1-7
Philippians 3.4-14
Matthew 21.33-46

The Landowner, the Vineyard, and the Tenants

Jesus is in Jerusalem, teaching in the Temple, where the tension between him and the religious authorities is palpable.

(As we heard in the text from last week), the “scribes and the elders” ask him to explain his authority. In his typical Zen Master-like fashion, he responds to a question with a question.

He asks them about the authority of the baptism of John the Baptist, is it of divine origin or of human origin? Of course, this either-or question is a trap. Neither answer is correct by itself; both answers are correct together. (The baptism of John is of *both* divine origin *and* human origin: the divine grace is from God; the human agency is from John.) But the scribes and the elders are bewildered by Jesus and do not answer his question. Jesus refuses to answer theirs.

But Jesus tells them a parable: the parable of the landowner who planted a rich and fertile vineyard. He built a fence to protect it; he dug a wine press to make good wine; he built a watchtower from which to watch the wide horizon. And then, the landowner leased the vineyard to his tenants.

The vineyard represents Israel, that is, the sacred place and the sacred tradition of the chosen people of God in the story of salvation. The vineyard could represent even more than that: it could stand for the Church, for the United States of America, or for the world.

The tenants represent the people who are given *by the landowner* a position of responsibility in the vineyard: they must take good care of it while it is leased to them.

What do we learn from the image of the landowner who plants a vineyard and leases it to his tenants?

That God has *freely* given us -- his people -- a place where we can do good work, where we can live a good life.

For the vineyard -- that is, Israel or the Church or this nation or this world -- is a place where we can work and worship together, live and love together.

The vineyard is the gift of life and the gift of a good place for our life.

The vineyard gives us good fruit and good wine.

The vineyard gives us its bounty and its beauty.

The landowner leases the vineyard to his tenants.

But the wicked tenants in the parable make a mistake:
they act as if they own the vineyard.

They do not; they are tenants.

They lease the vineyard in trust.

Likewise, we are the tenants in this life.

We the people -- of Israel or the Church or the nation or the world -- are not the owners of the vineyard.

We are caretakers.

We are stewards of a gift.

This parable is a cautionary tale: it is telling us that we must remember our position and our place as tenants of the vineyard.

And this parable is a lesson in gratitude because this is a lesson in impermanence.

We are given a gift and we do not own it.

All that we have and all that we are ... we do not own.

We hold the gift of life in the vineyard in trust only for a little while.

This is a gift that we must let go of when our time of letting go comes to us.

For truly, as tenants, the day will come when our lease is up.

So, the time to do good work, to live fully, to love fiercely, to let go of the unreal and the unnecessary ... that time is *now*, while we are here to enjoy the great gift of the vineyard that has been leased to us.

Amen.