

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.

A vineyard always had a wall and it needed a tower as well. So precious was the fruit and the vines that the wall was there to keep out animals and thieves and the tower was there so that the whole vineyard could be watched and defended. Just as in our own time, producing wine from a vineyard was a whole time activity. As Isaiah tells us, the soil had to be prepared and maintained, the vines themselves had to be tended and the spot for the vineyard had to be well chosen. All this is still important now and it was equally, if not more important, in Jesus' time if the vineyard was to produce fruit.

The vineyard that Isaiah describes in today's Old Testament reading was loved and maintained and yet yielded sour wild grapes that could not be used for making wine. The person looking after the vineyard could not have done more, so what went wrong?

The story comes to a strange ending with the wild and sour grapes because the experience is that such hard work will produce good quality grapes. It is at this point that we come to understand that Isaiah is not talking about an actual vineyard. He is talking about the people of Israel and uses the image to help them appreciate that they have a problem not with grapes but with life. Yes, they are sophisticated and learned, yes, they have the resources and yes they do all the right things in living but one indispensable ingredient is missing and that is their cooperation with God. The grapes are wild and sour because they have excluded and rejected the vital partner who is the creator himself.

Jesus uses the same image of the vineyard and compares the religious and political leaders to the tenants. It was common practice in Jesus' time for a vineyard to be let to tenant workers and it was common as well for the tenants to abuse their position and attempt to take the produce and their wealth for themselves. Again though, Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching is not actually about a vineyard, it is about his own people who came to think that they could find success and flourishing without God. Strangely, the Old Testament readings this week, and the Old Testament readings for those who are reading the Bible in a year, have a similar theme. Over centuries and millennia, God in his lavish love

was offering a message and a way of life that would lead to genuine peace and freedom but consistently and continually the people rejected the message and God's love along with it. They even turned to idolatry.

Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the vineyard has now become the Body of Christ; that vast community of members which is promised life and flourishing to the full. As Jesus says today "I tell you, then, that the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

Through Baptism and Eucharist we are called to produce the fruit and to take responsibility to care for his Kingdom or, if you like, the new vineyard. We are commissioned to be like leaven or light bringing the power of God into our world so that God's love and purpose might become a reality.

Let us compare our world and the experience of humanity in 2011, with both the vineyards we heard about in the scriptures. People of all races and ages are working, many of them struggling in their work, to bring abundant fruit for themselves, their families, communities and their nations. But what is happening? So many people are suffering famine, disease or deprivation, the economy of so many nations is in turmoil and the gap between rich and poor widens. So many are working hard, learning hard and yet do not seem to find fulfilment. Like the man whom Isaiah described, so many are trying their hardest and all we get is a sour harvest or, in real terms poverty, violence abuse and terrorism.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not offer a quick fix to the wrongs and fragility of human experience but it does offer a way to healing and the fullness of life. At the same time if the message of Jesus Christ is not incorporated into the life of humanity how can we expect success and flourishing? Humanity will certainly miss the target.

This is where we enter the story as those who have been given the task of producing fruit for the Kingdom. Always the starting point, as St. Paul points out, is our own relationship with Jesus in which we pray and turn to him in hope and reliance. He has to be a real and living person in our lives. This is vital. Then in that relationship we are filled with the Spirit of God so that our lives, lived in love, will transform not just our fragile selves but will bring his divine

power to the humanity and creation of which we are part, for its healing and growth in all that is noble, good and pure.

True we have busy lives; true we have so many concerns and worries; true life is full of so many opportunities and blessings to be enjoyed. But the greatest truth is that God's love for us in Jesus is greater than we can imagine and his power at work in us can achieve infinitely more for the good of humanity and ourselves if we live and act in his love and in response to that love.