

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Bruton Parish Church
The Rev'd Christopher L. Epperson
Sunday, October 2, 2011

I have always had a deep affection for the tone of Anglican worship. The Church where I grew up was built in a style that reflected the Victorian take on Gothic. It was a little dark, the altar was against the wall. During the Eucharist, the celebrant faced the wall, so we couldn't quite see what was happening. The 1928 Book of Common Prayer was the volume that dictated the shape and verbiage of worship. It sounded so remote to my 10-year-old ears.

What was very clear to me was that something special was enacted, when the Church gathered to offer praise, pray and encounter the mystery of Christ in the sacrament. God seemed present, but other, wholly different, at once within reach, but elusive.

God's otherness is pervasive in the scene from Exodus, when Moses interacts with God on Israel's behalf and gives the Law. So often, we hear The Decalogue in such a propositional fashion. God's rules, we should do our best to keep them...but the scene is so much richer. The people stand at a distance because the holiness of God yields a destabilizing awe. What is the appropriate response to coming near the source of being itself, and being invited to participate in the ongoing process of being? That is what the law is about for Israel. The observance of the Law keeps one accessible to God and in right balance with creation.

That sense balance is the story of God's pursuit of us. The pursuit is the heart of the allegory Jesus offers in the Gospel. Israel is the Vineyard; the rulers of Israel are the vineyard-keepers; the prophets are the messengers; Jesus is the son, and God is the owner/father. The message of the parable/allegory is that the Holy One of Israel pursues the entire creation, not just some people, but all people. This requires the balancing of expectations with the ultimate end of God's pursuit, to have us choose to live in love with God and one another. The point of the parable of the wicked tenants: God is calling us to a more ambitious hope and a bigger future than we might think.

Vineyard-keepers often struggle. It is too easy to become myopic and lose sight of how all pieces are parts of a whole, not ends in themselves. It is too easy to forget that the Holy One of Israel is wholly other.

That otherness moves us not to panic, but awe. We are awed and convicted by God's grand otherness.

The parable ends with Jesus asking the Chief Priests and the Elders what the owner will do when upon return. They say the owner will put the wicked tenants to death and give the vineyard to others. Jesus does not leave it there. Jesus knows God is different. Jesus eliminates the miserable death and promises that the Kingdom belongs to those who bear fruit.

God is not like us, Thank God. God is different and calls us to be different.