

**27<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY A 2008      OCTOBER 5, 2008**

**FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.**

**ISAIAH 5:1-7**

**PHILIPPIANS 4:6-9**

**MATTHEW 21:33-43**



Forty years ago when I was a scholastic teaching at Scranton Prep., I became good friends with an Italian family and often went to their house or to their grandparent's house who lived down the street for Sunday dinner. Their grandfather had what he called a "field" in the back of their house. It was a plot of ground no bigger than a quarter acre where he grew tomatoes, beans and an assortment of other vegetables, but his pride and joy was the grape vines which he carefully tended. Every season of the year he seemed to spend a good deal of his time feeding or pruning or in some way caring for those vines. When harvest time came near you could always tell how good the crop had been by the smile on his face, and the way that he talked in his broken English about the grapes. He was a man who took great pride in his children, and especially his grandchildren, but the grapes of his vineyard also shared in that pride. When he broke out the new wine it was always reason for celebration. I was not then and I am not now any real connoisseur of wines, but it was difficult not to like a wine that this man had put so much of his time, his work, and his self into. The fruit of his vineyard was much like a member of his family, like his children and grandchildren they too had flourished under the guidance of his love.

In our First Reading this morning from the prophet Isaiah draws from the prophetic tradition which envisions the people of God as Yahweh's vineyard, giving us a poetic lament of the bitter disappointment felt by God at the vintage yielded in His people. He has given them everything: He cleared, He spaded, He pruned. He has even built a watchtower to protect the grapes from thieves, and what does He receive in return? Wild grapes good for nothing! They were of no use as refreshing fruit in the hot summer months, as raisins for a sweet treat in the winter, nor for wine to relax and enjoy through out the year. The Lord's response is a combination of disappointment and anger. He has looked to His cherished Israel for the abundant fruit of justice, righteousness and compassion, and all He finds is injustice, cruelty and iniquity. The vines and the entire vineyard deserved nothing less than total destruction, left abandoned and fallow producing nothing but weeds and briars. Isaiah's words were a warning to Israel: having been given much from the generous and

loving hands of the Father much is expected, and unless there is a change in their ways, their own actions will bring about their destruction.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew today, Jesus has completed His journey to Jerusalem. The “hosannas” of Palm Sunday have become a memory as Jesus confronts the authorities who are to bring His life to its conclusion. He has cleansed the temple, and refused to tell them the authority for his actions. Today’s reading obviously echoes that of Isaiah’s “Song of the Vineyard.” His story also speaks of Israel as God’s vineyard, but here we have tenants, the religious authorities whose job it is to safeguard Israel for Yahweh the owner of the vineyard. It becomes a bloodbath of senseless murder ending with the murder of the owner’s son. Jesus aims His story at the smug, self-important leaders of the people. He tries to make it clear to them that their actions, their refusal to listen to Him and to act on His words leads to their own destruction. They have rejected the cornerstone and now they too will be rejected. As the chief priests and elders listen to His parable they cannot but understand His meaning, and from this point on they take every opportunity to find some way to rid themselves of this Jesus.

This parable has in the past been used to encourage anti-Semitism, but the truth is that it applies as much to us in our day as it did to the chief priests and elders in Jesus’ day. Certainly, Jesus’ parable becomes fact: the son is killed, dragged outside the city and murdered by being hung on a tree, and as much as we might like to blame that on the Jewish authorities or on the Romans, the fact remains that Jesus, the Son of God, emptied Himself to become one of us, and suffered His Passion and Death because of the sinfulness of every man, woman, and child who has ever existed and who will ever exist. Each and every one of us has contributed to Christ’s death, and yet each and every one of us can now live because of His sacrifice for us. Moreover, we are each given the opportunity to ally ourselves to Christ so that we bear fruit in the Lord’s vineyard. The quality of our fruit can only be measured by the way in which we mirror the “Fruit” of Mary’s womb. *How do we in our everyday lives imitate the Christ into whose death and resurrection we have been baptized and whose name we bear?*

Today’s reading from Matthew encourages to take stock of our own lives and to reflect on where we stand before God. *In this season of fruitfulness how have we been fruitful? Have we used the gifts and talents given us for the good of others and not simply for selfish gain? Have we mirrored the compassion of Christ in our lives? Have we fed the hungry not only with real food, but with real concern? Have we healed others with the touch of human compassion? Have we forgiven those whose words or actions have stung us, or have we asked*

*forgiveness for the hurt we have imposed on others?* To bear fruit means that we too become stewards, tenants responsible for the Lord's vineyard.

We should bear in mind as we listen to Paul's letter to the Philippians today that he wrote it from his prison cell under the condemnation to death. Yet, his joy overflows as he speaks to this community that he obviously loves. He is convinced that the peace of God will guide them in their growing faith, leading them and giving them a freedom to love. They have been shown that the peace of God living in their hearts is the fruit of their desire to imitate Christ in everything that they do. Awaiting his death, Paul understood that peace and wishes to share it not only with the community at Philippi but also with us.

In our Psalm this morning we are again reminded that God is always a loving keeper of His vineyard even when we fail to produce what might be expected. Like the grandfather of my friends in Scranton who faithfully cared for his few backyard vines year after year no matter how well or bad any particular year's produce may have been. God is the loving Vintner, but unlike grapes we must say "yes" to his loving care. His love, his forgiveness, his healing, his support is never forced upon us. We must each choose to allow the Divine Vintner access so that He might prune our hearts. If we do then His love, His compassion, His forgiveness will flow freely through us and from us like the new wine of the harvest.