

Pentecost 18, October 3, 2020 (Mt 21:33-46; Is 5:1-7; Php 3:4b-14; Ps 80:7-15)

There's a love song in the Old Testament, sung by God to his chosen people. In order to understand it, you need to remember the holy history of God's people. Two thousand years *before* Christ, God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him: **I will be your God, and you shall be my people; I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing** (Gen. 12:2).

Abraham's descendants, Isaac and Jacob, continued walking with God. Jacob's favorite son Joseph ended up in Egypt, saving the whole middle east from a seven-year famine. Four hundred years later, God sent Moses to Pharaoh to say repeatedly, **Let my people go**. After ten plagues on the land of Egypt and the house of Pharaoh, Moses led God's people through the Red Sea, whose waters miraculously divided, and then into the wilderness beyond.

Because of their ungrateful and rebellious hearts, God's people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Finally, after the death of Moses, Joshua led the chosen people into the Promised Land, a land so prosperous it seemed to be flowing with milk and honey.

Over and over again in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, resounds the theme that ***because* God has provided everything his chosen people need, God expects them to show justice, mercy, and kindness to everyone in their community**. And over and over, from the time of Moses until the end of the first century after Jesus' birth, God's chosen people betray that trust, misinterpreting, ignoring, or outright rejecting God's law of love.

The prophet Isaiah, writing around 738 BCE, informed the people that God was not pleased with their lack of faithfulness. In his great sorrow, Isaiah sang this love song to Jerusalem and the regions around this great city.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and carved out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield good grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

Isaiah was describing the prosperous setting God had given his chosen people, his *beloved*. Ideal land, perfect weather, and everything needed to produce abundantly. But instead of a harvest of sweet grapes, he got wild grapes—immense divine disappointment. His trust had been abused, his bounty mismanaged. His feelings were hurt, his heart pierced. And his love song became a lament:

And now, people of Jerusalem and Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for my vineyard? I expected it to yield good grapes—why did it yield wild grapes? . . .

In all my dealings with you, O Israel, says the Lord of hosts, I've been generous, loving, and kind. I've provided for you, protected you, and prospered everything you did. I've given you every kind of bounty so you could share your blessings with others—but you continue to seek your *own* welfare, you look to your own interests without regard to others. -- So much for the love song!

And now I'll tell you what I'll do to my vineyard, says the Lord. I'll remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I'll break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I'll make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I'll also command the clouds not to rain on it. . . . For I expected *justice*, but saw bloodshed; *righteousness*, but heard a cry.

Do you understand God's confusion and sorrow and pain? *I did all this for you, yet you don't do the same unto others.*

As far back as the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, we hear God's plea for compassion. From Leviticus: **When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt** (Lev 19:33-34).

This is a theme throughout the Old Testament. Time and again God's prophets speak out against Israel's hard-heartedness and stiff-necked arrogance and casual carelessness—uncaring—of others. Time and again God tells them what it is he *really* desires.

God speaks through the prophet Amos: **I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs. . . . But let justice roll down like fountains, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5: 21-24).**

The prophet Micah speaks out for God's chastened people: **With what shall I come before the Lord. . .? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? . . . [W]hat does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).**

And now God's love song has become a lament: **He expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry.**

Today's gospel from Mark is a restatement of Isaiah's *song of the vineyard*. Three weeks in a row Jesus has told a parable about a vineyard—the kingdom of heaven. And three weeks in a row the Pharisees have come under fire for their arrogance and *self*-righteousness. They think *they're* in charge, believe they know what God wants, because they're children of Abraham, to whom God gave the promise back in Genesis.

When Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard, they recognize how *wrong* that behavior is; but they don't see *themselves* in the parable until he says, **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—like *justice, righteousness, and kindness*.**

Do we want that *kingdom of God*? It takes a bold church—and remember, the *church* is the *people of God, the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers*; it's NOT a building—it takes a bold church to live counter-culturally.

It takes a bold church to stand up to cultural values and insensitive government, and to *insist* on the values of the kingdom of God: **justice, righteousness, and compassion.**

It takes a bold church to stand on Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.

It takes a bold Christian to accept God's infinite, immense, divine forgiveness and mercy *without* standing firmly on that cornerstone.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes his own love song about Jesus. **For Christ's sake I've suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as *rubbish* (actually "dung") in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

Sisters and brothers, Christ Jesus has made *us* his own. **He came down from heaven, God in human form, to become the steward of the vineyard and the cornerstone of the kingdom of God on earth.**

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that *everyone* who believes in him may not *perish*, but may have everlasting life. Jesus—*God-in-the-flesh*—died to make you his own. He loves you just the way you are, and he's entrusting his kingdom to *you*.

Thanks be to God!