

October 4th. 2020. Trinity 17.

Isaiah 5, 1-7, Psalm 80, 9-17, Matthew 21, 33-end

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Plants need to be cared for, if they are to produce the best results. As you know, growing roses is my hobby. I fertilise them, spray them regularly and dead-head them every day. This has been a particularly good year. Even so, the rose bushes can be attacked by green and whitefly and diseases, such as blackspot, which are not easy to eradicate.

In a similar way, vines have to have the correct conditions, if they are to produce good grapes to make into fine wine. In France, if there is likely to be a frost in the spring, they light fires at the end of the rows of vines; otherwise the crop may be spoilt. In the 19th. Century, vines were attacked by the insect, phylloxéra, which destroyed many vines. In any case, vintages may vary. I once visited a vineyard called Rasteau and didn't like their wine! It must have been a poor year. So, we went on to a small vineyard, called Cassan, and their wine was superb!

Today's first reading about a vineyard may be based on a love song, as it is poetic in its imagery, but with a twist at the end of verse 2, 'he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.' The carefully tended vineyard, with all that it needed, produced wild grapes.

The grower has done his bit; the community is summoned to give judgement and to agree with the sentence passed on the vineyard. It is to be condemned to destruction and deprived of fertility.

But the judges are judging themselves. They cannot help agreeing with the sentence, but it is on the Judah, which they themselves are. The care of God for his people has brought them not justice, but bloodshed, not righteousness, but a cry, suggesting that they have strayed away from the right life.

The symbol of the vineyard is found also in Psalm 80. This describes God's mighty acts in Israel's history, the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan and the empire of David and Solomon, 'You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You made room around it, and when it had taken root, it filled the land.'

Now the stone walls of God's protecting presence are gone and the vine is stripped of its fruit by enemies, 'Why then have you broken down its wall, so that all who pass by pluck its grapes?'

So, the psalmist prays for God's saving presence, 'Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and behold; Cherish this vine which your right hand has planted.'

He prays also for the coming of divine power to the king, who is called the son of man and endowed with more than human power, 'Let your hand be upon the man at your right hand, the son of man you made so strong for yourself.'

It is a prayer for a united Israel under a king in Jerusalem.

The Gospel has as its background the image of the vine in Isaiah and Psalm 80. In Isaiah, it is stated that the owner is God. Jesus shows that Israel's rule as the people of God has not been faithfully played out. Indeed, God's servants have been rejected by Israel, which will soon reject his Son. 'So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard and killed him' shows how the events of the Passion influenced this parable in Matthew's Gospel, as Jesus was first taken out of the city and then killed. For Matthew, the tenants are wretches, who will come to a miserable death. The new tenants can be relied on to produce according to expectations.

Then Matthew quotes Psalm 118, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

The Messiah is the rejected stone, which has become the cornerstone of the new building. Matthew points to the church as the nation, which will replace Israel in the purpose of God. The background to this may be the conflict between church and Judaism in the period before 70AD.

We are nurtured by being members of our church community, by its teaching, by what we read and hear, and by our participation in the Eucharist, where we receive the life and strength of God in the bread and wine. But our worship doesn't stop there; it has to lead on. Micah, wrote, 'And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' Without this, our religious ideals are damaged. Jesus shows by what he says and does that true fruitfulness lies in living lives of justice, kindness and humility. So there has to be a match between what we believe and the way in which we behave. The corona virus crisis has revealed that there are many people in different countries, who are left behind, struggling, disadvantaged. But they are all people, who are equally loved by God.

On the news recently, we saw the head of a school in South Africa, which was closed, owing to the virus, taking clothes and other items to

people in a local township, showing that, even though they couldn't go to school at this time, they were valued.

Can our worship lead us on to be faithful to the way of Jesus and to be truly a loving and serving people? It is all summed up in the last verse of the hymn, New every morning is the love:

Only, O Lord, in thy dear love
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.