

Friday (Oscar Romero)

This is what we are about. We plant seeds that will one day grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

John 15:1-2,4-6

Jesus said, "I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. Remain in me, as I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.

A group of us meet each week to discuss the readings. If you would like to read the discussion notes, considering these questions, please go to www.sthelenscrosby.org.uk Go to 'prayer', then click on 'Thinking outside the pew'.

Q1 Do we want a nice God who doesn't get angry?

Q2 How do religious people come to reject God?

Q3 How do we know if we, as the present tenants, are the same as previous tenants?

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27th Week of Ordinary Time

700Bc.....33AD.....2017. Same old story?

When my daughters were young children, playing in the tent in the garden we sat outside, reading. Realising that they hadn't heard us for some time, one of the girls called out to see if we were still there, but we kept quiet. Thinking they had been left alone, one felt rather worried whilst the other quickly saw the opportunities, saying, "we can do what we like! We can mess the house up and we won't get told off." I suspect her attitude to power and her lack of understanding of stewardship is at the heart of why both Isaiah and Jesus about 700 years later told the Parable of stewards in the vineyard. Isaiah 5:1-7 ends with God being decidedly angry, tearing down the walls of the vineyard he had lovingly created and allowing the plants to be trampled on and the whole thing go to ruin. Although this seems a rather harsh reaction, the explanation and the following verses shows that the tenants (the leaders of the House of Judah) have become a pretty appalling bunch. The 'sour grapes' which God found were the distressed cries of the poor (the weak and the vulnerable), which reflect the injustice of the leaders who, it turns out, are happy to accept bribes, are devoted to drink and leisure and have become so arrogant that they dismiss God as not necessary, and impotent: 'We can do what we want and no one can stop us'. Their arrogance, their ignoring and exploitation of the weak when their responsibility was to create a just society, built on God's ways produced a harvest very different to the grapes which had been sown.

When Jesus takes Isaiah's parable and uses it against the chief priests and elders, (Mt. 21:33-43) they would immediately know that they are being cast as the wicked tenants. He doesn't accuse them of corrupt or immoral behaviour. The way Jesus adapts the parable points to their arrogance: in disposing of the servants sent by the owner, they are putting themselves in the long line of leaders who have rejected the prophets sent by God, but in thinking that they can kill the son and not only get away with it, but take over ownership of the vineyard is, from the outside, extraordinary stupidity or arrogance. They are acting as though the owner is dead, or impotent to intervene.

It would be easy to 'tut-tut' and dismiss them as 'baddies', but it is reasonable to assume that they are good and sincere religious people, who take their responsibility to guard and hand on the faith. The problem seems to be that in all their religious rules and observances, God has been excluded. They consider that they own the vineyard and its produce and have forgotten that they are stewards.

As they have to admit, the owner will hand over the stewardship to others – the followers of Jesus. This is where we come in, as the present tenants. We are now the ones who are to produce the harvest of justice and integrity, i.e. cultivating God's Kingdom. There is a significant difference in that the people in both readings lived in cultures where religion and 'life' were completely integrated, whereas we live in a secular society where many follow different or no religions. We could see this as the walls of the vineyard torn down, open to all to trample on it, as in Isaiah, or we could see this as Jesus' instruction to go out and tell all people the Good News.

It's important to recognise the danger of falling into the traps which good people have fallen into down the ages: thinking that the vineyard is ours. A bit of 'tent theology' suggest it's the difference between 'We can do what we like' and recognising our dependence on God.

Martin Bennett

Monday (St. Augustine)

Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly city formed by the love of self, leading to contempt of God, and the heavenly city by the love of God. The former glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. In the one city, the rulers and the nations that it subdues are ruled by the lust for domination; in the other city rulers and subjects serve one another in love. The wise men of the former city, living by human standards, sought bodily or intellectual profit or both. In the other city, however, there is only godliness which offers due worship to the true God.

Scripture (Isaiah 5:2,4,7)

My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it, cleared it of stones, and planted it with fine grapes. He expected it to yield fine grapes: sour grapes were all it yielded. He expected fair judgement, but found injustice, uprightness, but found cries of distress.

Tuesday (Chief Seattle, 1854.)

(To the American President) We will consider your offer to buy our land, but the idea is strange to us. This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. One thing we know— our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land, but you cannot. The whites, too, shall pass. But in your perishing, you will shine brightly, fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land and for some special purpose gave you dominion over this land. That destiny is a mystery to us. One thing we know, our God is the same God. The earth is precious to him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny.

Scripture (Matthew 21:34-43)

'When vintage time drew near, the owner sent his servants to the vineyard to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his servants, stoning one and killing another. When he sent a larger number, the same happened. Finally he sent his son to them. When the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, " This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him and take over his inheritance." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They answered, 'He will bring them to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him at the proper time.'
Jesus said 'I tell you, then, that the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to people who will produce the fruit.'

Wednesday (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)

Humility does not cast us down as individuals, it raises us up and makes clear to us our role as ambassador. It obliges us to respect the presence of God in ourselves and in others, to make us the messenger of God or the path taken by God. Humility forces us to forget ourselves in order that we might wax and grow; for if we exult in our own importance, the path is transformed into the sea.

Scripture (Rm. 6:13-19)

Are we free to sin now that we are not under law but under grace? Out of the question! You can be the slave of either sin, which leads to death, or obedience which leads to saving justice. Once you were the slaves of sin, but thank God you have given whole-hearted obedience to the pattern of teaching to which you were introduced; and so, being free from sin, you took uprightness as your master.

Thursday (Fr. Austin Smith, CP)

Francis of Assisi possessed and exercised power. Adolf Hitler possessed and exercised power. The origins of their power differed and their exercise of power may not bear comparison, not to mention the consequences of both its possession and exercise. So often today, these matters seem to be removed from the "God" question. The struggle towards justice for all who are stigmatised, marginalised and alienated is not perceived as a profound question about the active presence of God at the centre of humanity's possession and exercise of power. The presence of God is not quite the starting point. The intermingling of church, world and human quest does not seem to be a radical ground for living and conversing.

Scripture (Zephaniah 3:1-2,9,12-13)

Woe to the rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She has not listened to the Lord, she has not bowed to correction, she has not trusted in the Lord, she has not drawn near to her God. Then, declares the Lord, I shall purge the lips of the peoples, so that all may invoke the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder. I shall leave surviving a humble and holy people, and those who are left will take refuge in the name of the Lord.