

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

“The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God’s cherished plants.”

Isaiah 5, 1-7

“The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who will produce its fruits.”

Matthew 21, 33-43



I find today’s gospel parable difficult to explain because of the fact that many Christians seem to me to be a bit too hasty to turn a parable told by Jesus into an allegory about Jesus. So they are quick to equate the king’s son with Jesus and, as a consequence, to interpret the rejection and murder of the king’s son as the rejection and murder of Jesus by his own people.

As a way of getting into today’s parable, I would therefore like to start with the imagery of the first reading from Isaiah. The agricultural metaphor which Isaiah uses raises the question: Just how do we all go about “growing” people?

Having the benefits of modern psychology, we all know a little about the kind of environments in which human beings flourish. We know that parents have to find the right mix of affection and encouragement and challenge in order to help their children grow through childhood and adolescence into young adults who have a healthy blend of self-esteem and self-confidence. As a result, we may find Isaiah’s horticultural imagery a little quaint.

However, it’s not all bad. When we talk about “growing” people, about furthering their personal and spiritual growth in the way we grow vines and flowers and shrubs, we know we have to give attention to their individuality and their peculiar needs. We have to recognize that a particular child might be very restless and that an adolescent boy may be unusually silent. We have to make judgments that some in our care will be able to adjust to hostile environments without losing their enthusiasm. We know that one member in the family might need to be protected from harsh contacts while others have to be treated with brutal frankness just for their own protection. We may have to remind others that they really do have within themselves the capacity to recover from disappointments, fractured relationships and loss of friends. Others have to be nourished emotionally without our having to meet their every want. Of course, their physical needs have to be met, for they, like plants, require the right amount of fresh air, water and sunlight to sustain them. Some of us take on the responsibility of having to prune away the rough spots in others. This is the role of parents and teachers and people like novice directors in religious congregations. Those with this kind of responsibility have to lead their charges to understand that such pruning is in their best interests.

When all this “cultivation” goes well, we are blessed with a rich variety of people who, in their turn, will enrich the lives of those they serve or with whom they live and work and socialise. Parents, teachers, medicos, psychologists, social workers and spiritual guides all give their time and effort and expertise in an effort to foster healthy personal growth in others. So it’s hardly surprising that Goes does, too.

This image of God as a horticulturalist might not appeal to everyone. Like most images, it can limp a little, particularly if we stretch it to depict God as running some kind of hothouse

experiment. (Sadly, the only horticultural image of God that some have been able to find is that of the Grim Reaper.)

Whatever of that, the criticism that Jesus makes in today's gospel of those who are determined to frustrate his best efforts is that they prefer their own way of doing things and their own standing in the community to other people's growth. That, I suggest, is the real message of today's gospel parable. And Jesus emphasizes his message by inviting the crowd to supply the ending to the parable by asking them a question to which there was really only one possible answer: "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do when to those tenants when he comes?" They replied: "He will bring that wicked crowd to a bad end and will lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it that he has grapes at vintage time." (Matthew 21, 40-41)

There is a temptation for people in power in all institutions, including the Church, to put personal privilege and position ahead of the growth and development of those in their care. Today's parable was directed by Jesus at the chief priests and the elders who were there among the crowd in the Temple. He accused them of letting their own comfort and religiosity stand in the way of growing healthy, self-determining, thinking people. They were growing nobody, not even themselves. And therein lies the message for us. We are all capable of frustrating healthy growth in others. We can do it because of fear that they will make mistakes. We can do it through jealousy of them, not wanting them to outshine us. We can do it because we don't want them to succeed us, and so we deprive them of opportunity. We can do it by setting up barriers and regulations that will discourage them from even trying.

Henri Nouwen tells an apposite story about watermelons which complements the parable of today's gospel:

Once upon a time, there was a man who travelled to a strange land. There he saw people fleeing in horror from a wheat field. "There's a terrible monster in the field!" they screamed. The traveller went into the field himself and found the monster - a watermelon. The villagers had never seen a watermelon before. So, trying to be kind, he offered to "kill" the monster for them. He hacked the melon off the vine and then cut a slice and began to eat it. The people became even more terrified of the stranger. "He will eat us, too!" they cried. So they picked up their pitchforks and drove him away.

Some time later, another traveller to the same village found himself confronted by the same "monster." But instead of offering to "kill" it, he told the villagers that it must be dangerous and tiptoed away from it. Gaining the confidence of the villagers, this second traveller was able to teach them some basic horticultural facts about the "monster" in their midst. The villagers lost their fear of the melons and began to cultivate them for food.

The first traveller, while trying to help the villagers, only intensified their fear; his knowledge became even more frightening for them. But the second traveller was a man of compassion and sensitivity. He shared their fears, empathised with them, and then was able to help them rise above their fears.

In the person of Jesus, God entered the human race. Jesus lived our life, experienced our fear and suffering and showed us how to reshape and transform our lives in God's love. Faith in God is not some kind of power bestowed on some self-appointed elite. Nor is God some kind of weapon we bring out to impose on others our sense of orthodoxy. Faith is an awareness of God's presence in our lives, a presence that is meant to encourage us and inspire us with hope as we face the challenges that come our way.