

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Luke 12: 49-56; Hebrews 11:29—12:2

Isaiah 5:1-7 is one of the most creative and imaginative poems written by the prophet Isaiah. He actually builds this prophecy upon a popular wine harvest song, which he reinterprets to suit his prophetic purposes. Thus, he uses it to deal with God's relationship with the nations of Israel and Judah. Intriguingly, Jesus 800 years later takes Isaiah's reinterpretation of this "Song of the Vineyard" and reinterprets it once again to create the parable of the wicked tenants who kill the prophets and then the vineyard owner's son in order to try to steal his inheritance (Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).

This song of the wine harvest is almost held intact for its first two verses (although being reinterpreted by Isaiah while remaining intact), but then with a highly imaginative twist, Isaiah changes the song's lyrics in verse three to allow him to then present his message – but in the rhythm and meter of the original poem.

As the song can be reconstructed from this text (so that we can restore it to its original form), the song was to be sung by a woman who sings it about her husband, "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard" (vs. 1a). She is speaking of the man's vineyard, but she actually means herself, for she is "a vineyard on a very fertile hill" (vs. 1b). Women were responsible for music making in the ancient Israelite culture (except for the singing of the Psalms), and their songs normally were about love, lovemaking and their consequent fertility (Song of Songs 8:12; Judg. 21:15-25; Isa. 32:9-14). Thus, the songs were essentially erotic in nature.

This woman thus sings of herself and of her beloved. Seeing herself as a fertile vineyard, the woman tells us, "He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. And it brought forth good grapes" (5:2). Thus, this traditional song of the wine harvest both rejoiced in the work "my beloved" had done to insure a rich harvest of grapes, but also she sang of how he had "dug", "cleared" and "planted" her (such words referring to the couple's acts of lovemaking). The result was "good grapes" – both an abundant grape harvest and an abundance of "good" children!

But Isaiah takes this traditional song and adapts it to his purposes. He changes the final line of the poem, so that it no longer reads its original "It brought forth good grapes". Rather, it was now changed by Isaiah to read, "When I expected it to yield (good) grapes, why did it yield wild grapes" (vs. 2e-f)? The Hebrew, which is tamely translated by the English "wild grapes", actually is "noxious grapes" or "stinking things" – obviously contrasting the words "good grapes" and "noxious grapes".

With this rewriting of the final line of the original wine harvest song, the entire poem is transformed. Suddenly it no longer holds its double meaning of a farmer caring for his vineyard and a husband "digging, clearing and planting" his wife, but it suddenly turns God into "the beloved" who is tending his vineyard Israel and Judah (the divided northern and southern kingdoms). That tending on God's part should have, by all horticultural knowledge (and carnal

knowledge) produced “good grapes”. But instead, it has produced “stinking things” – a harvest of totally useless and even repugnant grapes.

Isaiah now assumes control over the song, and adds his own lines while keeping perfect meter in its original Hebrew with the original song. The new lyrics are now spoken by God (the “beloved”) of and to his bride (Judah and Israel). “And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? (vss. 3-4)?

God has been responsible toward Judah and Israel, “digging”, “clearing” and “planting” it in the land of Canaan, providing for it the Law to give structure to God’s intentions for the nation to act justly, equitably and relationally, bringing to it prophets, judges and priests in the tradition of Moses in order to keep them centered on God’s intentions for them. But the result – the totally unexpected result – the result occurring harvest season after harvest after harvest – are “noxious grapes”, “stinking things” – two nations possessed by greed, the lust for power and control, far from God’s intentions for them.

What, then, must God as the vineyard owner, do? “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hœd, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it” (vss. 5-6).

It is intriguing how Isaiah presents what it is that God will do to Israel, and what will be the inevitable consequence of Israel’s actions. God will “remove its hedge, break down its wall, make it a waste” and “will also command the clouds”. In other words, because of Israel/Judah’s disregard and disobedience of God’s call to them that brought them out of Egypt, God will remove all the protection he has placed around God’s people. And the inevitable result of the withdrawal of God’s blessing will be “it shall be devoured, trampled down, overgrown with briars and thorns, no rain upon it”. Simply put, God will give these nations over to the destruction they will have wrought upon themselves, because they have ignored the inevitable consequences of their actions (“what goes around, comes around”). And that destruction will finally come through “briars and thorns” – that is, through invasion by other nations, their enslavement by those nations, and the desolation that follows such total destruction (Isaiah 7:23-25; 3:4-5; 32:13).

Isaiah now draws the conclusion – the final judgment or “moral” of the song. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel and the people of Judah, his pleasant planting. He expected justice (from them), but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry” (v. 7)! Now the prophet makes crystal clear whom he is writing about (not a vineyard owner and his plants, nor a lover and his wife, but God and Israel/Judah). And Isaiah sums up what God’s expectations of good grapes would be: justice and righteousness – and what God actually got out of the nation he had chosen as God’s own – bloodshed and “a cry”.

In writing of God's expectations and of the actual results, Isaiah builds a very intriguing and clever wordplay. He juxtaposes "justice" (Heb., *mishpat*) and "bloodshed" (*mishpakh*), "righteousness" (*sdaqah*) and "a cry" (*s'aqah*). The results still are "grapes" (the close parallelism of the words), but these grapes, rather than being the "good" results of living for shalom ("justice" and "righteousness") are the "noxious or stinking grapes" of warfare both within both nations and with the nations around them, and "a cry" of pain from those who now find themselves living in oppression, exploitation and rejection because of their own actions. Thus, by ending the poem with this parallel construction, Isaiah smoothly returns the poem to its origins of seeking "good grapes" and receiving "wild grapes" instead!

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19 is a prayer for Israel's restoration. It is a balanced and beautiful psalm, full of powerful images. But it is also a psalm that reveals that its author doesn't recognize the gravity of the sin of Israel.

The psalm is built around a refrain, repeated three times (80:3, 7 and 19): "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved". The first time the refrain is used is to conclude the first image (80:1-3) of a shepherd caring for his flock, Israel, but disturbed by their rebelliousness. The second time the refrain is used is to conclude the second image (80:4-7). That image is of a father, angry at his children's disobedience. But the third time it is used is in conjunction with the dominant image of the Psalm – Israel as a vine (80:8-19).

By likening Israel to a vine, the Psalmist joins with Israel's greatest prophets in using a common image – Isaiah in 5:1-7, Jeremiah in 2:21 and Ezekiel for the entirety of his chapter 15. Here is what the Psalmist has to say about Israel as the vine:

"You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that moves in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand has planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name" (80:8-18).

The image is a powerful image – one of God bringing a little shoot of a vine out of Egypt, planting it in the rich soil of Palestine, and then watching it grow as it spreads to north and south, east and west until that one plant has filled the entire nation of Israel, to its very boundaries. But then God begins acting against it! Apparently for no reason, God breaks down the walls surrounding the vine so that the boar and every wild beast might enter the vineyard and forage on the plant (Assyria, Egypt, Babylon). Now, they have virtually destroyed the vine, and the psalmist is calling to God both for redress and correction of the situation, so that Israel could have "a future and a hope".

What is missing from this account is any recognition on the part of the psalmist that Israel's destruction was caused in any way by their disobedience of the covenant, their rejection of God or their acts of injustice. There is no *mea culpa* in this psalm. If this psalm was the only scriptural record with which we might work, we would have to conclude that Yahweh was simply acting arbitrarily to punish Israel, with no justification for his action. Therefore the psalm's prayer, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved" falls on God's deaf ears, for there is no recognition of guilt on Israel's part and, consequently, no repentance!

Luke 12:49-56 is one of the most disturbing statements ever made by Jesus, particularly if we see Jesus as being the epitome of love, the bringer of peace and the provider of "good news to the poor" (4:18). He states in this hard saying, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (12:49-51)!

In this hard saying, Jesus declares that he is not a peace-bringer or love-provider to the world. Rather, he brings division, conflict and stress. Who he is and what he stands for automatically results in division between people. "From now on five in one household will be divided; three against two and two against three. They will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (vss. 52-53).

Why does Jesus, through his very presence as well as his actions and words, bring about division? It is simply that all that Jesus is and all that he stands for is over against all the priorities by which society builds its life together. The world, its powerful people and those who embrace the priorities of the powerful see life as centered in the accumulation of wealth; Jesus is committed to the sharing of wealth and the elimination of poverty. The powerful and their followers are centered in the building of power for their own aggrandizement; Jesus is about the formation of a world that protects the powerless and is committed to setting all people – but especially the marginalized, the exploited and the oppressed – free. The powerful and those who would imitate them are totally oriented around a commitment to domination as the center of their lives – being in control and using that control primarily for their and their kind's benefit; Jesus is committed to the sharing of power and of shaping all of existence around the building of deep and trustful relationships between people and between those people and God. Jesus is about the creation of an entirely different way of life upon entirely different principles – the Kingdom of God, the shalom community. And those who stand for the alternative of domination both hate and fear Jesus, for if Jesus convinces humanity that his way is the way people should live, these powerful ones will no longer be in control, using their position to build their power and wealth. And that, after all, is what life is really all about (or so they believe)!

In other words, Jesus is an agitator – perhaps *the* ultimate agitator of society. His very presence represents an entirely different way of understanding life that, by its very nature, is a threat to any other standard for living life. Therefore, both because of whom he is and what he teaches and does, he will set "father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter and

daughter against mother”. And likewise, he will not be the purveyor of peace and love (although he is the essence of peace and love) but of strife, agitation and conflict.

Jesus therefore speaks sharp words to those who are drawn to him (“the crowds” – v. 54a) but who also unthinkingly accept and abide by “the world’s” standards for life, taught to them by their political, economic and religious leaders. It is to the people seduced by the systems that Jesus says, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, “It is going to rain”; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, “There will be scorching heat”; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time” (vss. 54-56)? Those who are captured by the systems, including those unthinkingly captured (that is, don’t even recognize they have been captured by priorities foreign to God), Jesus says to them “You understand all the minutia of living life successfully under the priorities of the systems (e.g., “Buy low; sell high”). But you can’t begin to perceive how you have been duped by your buying into those systems – so that God’s priorities for ordering life seem foreign to you, while the system’s priorities seem to be the norm to you. You can’t even discern the difference (“the sign of the times”)!”

In this Gospel Lesson for today, one sees clearly expressed the difference between Jesus’ intentions for the world and the system’s (and all humanity’s) intentions. One also sees Jesus in his clear role of agitator, seeking to stir up people and to make them think – and then to act out of their reflection. But one also captures the intense frustration of Jesus who has ministered to “the crowds” for three years, as well as to those who have followed him, only to realize that they don’t have a clue. Even after three years, Jesus realizes that the people just don’t get it, for they are so committed to the domination style of life (whether intentionally or unthinkingly) that they can’t discern that Jesus offers them a distinct alternative that would bless them and transform the world if only they would embrace it!

Hebrews 11:29—12:2 continues the magnificent recital of Old Testament heroes of faith that we began to explore in last Sunday’s epistle lesson. In this passage, the author of Hebrews begins his recital with the people of Israel taking the step of faith into the Red Sea, not knowing what would happen but nevertheless obedient to the instructions of Moses. It was their faith, as well, that brought down the walls of Jericho during the conquest of Canaan. And the author commends a Gentile, a woman and even a prostitute, Rahab, “because she had received the spies in peace”.

Having rehearsed Israel’s worthies from Abel through Abraham and Moses to Rahab, the author of Hebrews then summarizes what would otherwise be much too long of a list. “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (11:32-34). He speaks of the faithful action of many, some mentioned by names and others not so – but the point is that he presents those of faith as being the faithful ones who may have known triumphs but also knew defeat, persecution, rejection and torment. Yet in the midst of their difficulties, they went on believing in God’s

promises and keeping their “eyes on the prize”. They were, in the words of this author, those “of whom the world was not worthy”.

The author of Hebrews then concludes this chapter with the powerful words, “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” (11:39-40).

With these words, the author of Hebrews connects the Israelite heroes with the Christians of his day. These models of faith sensed the powerful ways in which God was at work to transform society into the world as God intended. But none of them lived to see it actually accomplished. There was something more, as if all creation waited on tiptoe for the coming of Jesus and his kingdom. But that “something more” was coming, in God’s timing, to the earth and would embrace these ancient worthies in the faith in that coming, as well as those who have seen and met Jesus, and who are now alive (at the time of the writing of this epistle). “They would not, apart from us, be made perfect”, the author writes. And, in a profound sense, “we would not, apart from them, be made perfect” either – for we are all of one body, one people of faith. So it is, the author is telling us, that all of God’s people will be brought together into one magnificent creation, when God’s kingdom comes as Jesus intends it to come.

Then this magnificent passage reaches its shining apex at the beginning of the twelfth chapter. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God” (12:1-2).

The image conjured by the author of Hebrews is a dramatic one. In the metaphor of a race, he presents both life and the corporate struggle of God’s people to realize the kingdom of God. But it is not just any sort of race. It is a marathon. Those running that race have been running from city to city, over hill and dale, through thickets, fording streams, up steep hills, mile after mile after mile, hour after hour. Finally, the Christians running this race reach their city destination, running through its streets toward the stadium. Suddenly, they burst into the stadium, and as they do the crowd rises to its feet, cheering them on. That crowd is made up of all those Old Testament worthies who had once run the race themselves. But now they watch the young Christians running it in their stead. And they stand to their feet and cheer them on. Emboldened by those cheers, these Christian marathoners cast aside the weight of their own exhaustion, their screaming muscles, their aching calves, the discomfort of lungs feeling like they will burst, and they run with all their spent might toward the prize at the end of the stadium. They feel exhausted, they are in deepest pain, they feel like they will almost certainly collapse.

And then they see him – they see him standing at the finish line, waiting for them to arrive. It is Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of their faith” – the one who himself ran this marathon of life and ran it to certain death, to the cross, to the shame of that execution. Yet, he ran it with joy, with hope, with conviction, and with an overwhelming love for all those on the track, all those in the field, all those in the stand who had themselves been faithful or were now being people of

faith, so that they can join Jesus at taking “his seat at the right hand of the throne of God”, the seat of the winner of this race.

For in the race of faith, in the race of faithfulness, there is not a single winner. There is Jesus. There is Abel and Enoch and Noah, of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, of Jacob and Esau and Joseph, of Moses and the people and Rahab, of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. But there are still others, not recorded by the author of Hebrews. There is Peter and Mary Magdalene, Paul, John, Mary and Martha. There is Origen and Athanasius, Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, Abelard and Heloise, Anselm and Aquinas, Wycliffe and Hus, Luther and Calvin, Wesley and Wilberforce, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Theodore Weld, Mother Teresa and Teresa of Avila, Charles Finney and Martin Luther King Jr. All have been winners in this race that does not end until God’s Kingdom comes.

And now, it is our turn. We join the race. We run the marathon. We have entered the stadium, buoyed by the cheers of centuries and centuries of the faithful. And now we see Jesus at the finish line. And he is standing there, arms open wide for us all – all of us who are running. So we run toward him, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”. And we will all be winners of that race of life!

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