

The vineyard is before us as an image today, an image for a people, for a nation, for some kind of meaningful community.

The vineyard is Israel, in the first instance, certainly in the conception of Isaiah and in the parable of Jesus.

Planted by God in chosen soil, the Hebrew people were meant to bear a certain fruit and yet they did so only intermittently.

To be sure, sometimes there were grapes, sometimes they exhibited holiness and love of God and neighbor; this was the intended fruit.

Sometimes the harvest was great, and the wine vat was full, and Israel's life was pleasing to God.

But sometimes, more often, wild and sour grapes were the produce of the vineyard.

There was economic unfairness, false weights and measures, mistreatment of laborers.

There was false worship, of the fertility spirits of the Canaanites in the high places on the hills.

There was a trust in national destiny, in the Davidic monarchy, in a way that reduced God to a bit player,

in a supporting role in a drama that Israel increasingly saw itself directing.

Things were not well in the vineyard.

Here is a difficult thing; it is not good for us to imagine that we, the Christian Church have replaced the Jews as God's chosen people.

Violence and genocide are at the end of the road that begins by imagining that we are Israel's replacement.

But we have to spend some time with Israel, perhaps standing with her in her place, if this and other places in the Word can register for us.

So that is a universalizing move; we have to see ourselves in the vineyard, our own planting and hear the words of judgment against the vineyard as registering against us as well as against Israel.

If we Gentiles have come to share in Israel's spiritual gifts through Christ, surely we have come to share in her failures and judgments against her as well.

As Isaiah spoke the word of God, "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 hoed,

and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it."

I'd say that is a pretty good picture of how most of us feel about our vineyard lately.

Vineyards are pretty pleasant places, when they are in good shape.

Grapes grow best in climates with low humidity, warm days, and cool nights, places like northern California and southern France.

They are wonderful places to hike and bike or picnic and have a glass of the local produce.

But our vineyard doesn't feel like that right now.

New horrors in mass shootings are presented too every six months or so, with no discernable change in our national conversation about them.

The natural order has seemed against us this fall, with hurricanes battering the already battered and earthquakes leveling schools full of little children.
Then there's North Korea, and western wildfires...quite a list.
and we feel untended, full of weeds,
without a protecting wall around us.
And here is the worst part: if we take today's Scriptures at their plain meaning, the fault is ours.
We have not produced the social and personal holiness God expected;
we have not borne the fruit intended;
we have not done justice and have mistreated those sent by God to work among us,
from the prophets through Jesus Christ,
and including God's beloved poor whose needs are still ignored today.

Yet we know that fixing up our behavior will not make everything go well in the vineyard.
God is not tit for tat; there seem to be some random things in the universe.
And maybe there is some admission of that in the vineyard image,
for the vines flourish or suffer there based on a mysterious interaction of many factors.
One young vine grows bravely and another fails to thrive.
The vine keeper steps on one in a moment of inattention or gives another a bit more manure.
The wall casts a bit more shade on one,
or rain falls more or less abundantly
or disease weakens some plants or the whole lot.
At the end of the season, that all comes together in a harvest that fails or succeeds or is in
between and how it all came to be is hard to understand.

We are here to cultivate a holy community, in church, neighborhood and nation,
in obedience to God and in the love of Christ,
but conditions may be favorable or unfavorable,
and we may be able to say that God has prospered or has not prospered the work of our hands
in any season.
Certainly we live with a sense of the overwhelming nature of our problems;
of being part of a national community that confounds us with its diversity,
its polarization, its strident and un-reconciled regions, groups, and interests.
I don't know what to do with this country except pray for it and try to love the people with
whom I share my small part of it,
the corner of the vineyard that still makes sense to me.
And even here, we can be sure that we are not always bearing the fruit of righteousness,
that we have much of which to repent.

For we do not want the vineyard taken from us, do we?
I don't imagine that God is about to turn America or Greenwood or the Episcopal Church over
to some other people,
but it is entirely possible that we can lose the great gifts entrusted to us.
Skip church enough Sundays and someone will take your pew.
Skip Sunday school often enough, and it won't be offered.

Fail to greet neighbor and he won't call you when he needs you.
Fail to share your wealth and the institutions that bind us together will fail.
Don't bother to vote or run for office and the quality of our leadership will further decline.
And if we lose our vineyards, the church, the neighborhood, the nation; then we'll see if God can use the internet, travel soccer, and big-time college football to save us, those things that we are tempted to prefer to the cultivation of a real community.

I wouldn't put anything past the redemptive power of Almighty God,
but there is no call for us to test the divine.

Jesus came among us to show us a new way to love, that reaffirmed the old ways God had previously revealed.

As the commandments had long taught, the Lord Jesus embodied; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.

That is what we are supposed to be doing in the vineyard;
no matter the conditions, distractions, or other opportunities.

By living faithfully in the way of Jesus, we can make sure that his parables are not told against us, but to revive and convert us,
that we might live faithfully in him in this vineyard and in the world to come.