

Sunday 4 October 2020
 Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
 Dignity New York

First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me now sing of my beloved,
 my beloved's song concerning a
 vineyard.

My beloved had a vineyard
 on a fertile hillside.

My beloved dug the soil, cleared it of stones,
 and planted the choicest vines,
 and within it built a watchtower
 and hewed out a wine press.

Then my beloved looked for the crop of grapes,
 but what it yielded was wild grapes.

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 had not done?

Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes,
 did it bring forth wild grapes?

Now, I will let you know
 what I mean to do to my vineyard:

Take away its hedge, give it to grazing,
 break through its wall, let it be
 trampled!

Yes, I will make it a ruin:
 it will not be pruned or hoed,
 but overgrown with thorns and briars.

I will command the clouds
 not to send rain upon it.

The vineyard of the God of Hosts is the house
 of Israel,
 and the people of Judah are God's cherished
 plant;

Our God looked for justice,
 but found bloodshed,
 for integrity,
 but only a cry of distress.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:6-9

Dismiss all anxiety from your minds; instead, present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, my sisters and brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous or worthy of praise. Live according to what you have learned and accepted; what you have heard me say and seen me do. Then will the God of peace be with you.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:33-43

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people, "Listen to another parable. There was a property owner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, installed a winepress and erected a tower. Then the owner leased it out to tenant farmers and went on a journey.

“When vintage time arrived, the owner sent aides to the tenants to divide the shares of the grapes. The tenants responded by seizing the aides. They beat one, killed another and stoned a third. A second time the owner sent even more aides than before, but they treated them the same way. Finally the owner sent the family heir to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my heir.’

“When the vine-growers saw the heir, they said to one another, ‘Here’s the one who stands in the way of our having everything. With a single act of murder, we would seize the inheritance.’ With that, they grabbed and killed the heir outside the vineyard. What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants?”

They replied, “The owner will bring that wicked crowd to a horrible death and lease the vineyard out to others, who will see to it that there are grapes for the proprietor at vintage time.”

Jesus said to them, “Did you ever read in the scriptures, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; it was Our God’s doing and we find it marvelous to behold’? That’s why I tell you, the kin-dom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will bear its fruit.”

“Disappointment”

by John P. Falcone

Tonight’s readings remind me that it’s been a long, hard few days; a long, hard epidemic; a long, hard four years. The first and the last reading are mainly about disappointment. The middle reading is about finding peace.

The first reading is an unusual ‘love song.’ The prophet Isaiah sings to us about his best friend; his bosom friend; his beloved. To be specific, he tells us about his beloved’s wine-making project. It seemed like a good idea at the time: dig out the rocks; plant a few vines; spend some money; and: voilà! A lovely barrel of wine! Unfortunately, his beloved’s vineyard refused to cooperate.

But, surprise! The beloved turns out to be God, and the ‘love song’ turns out to be an indictment. The verses that follow our reading contain a full list of the counts in that indictment: taking poor people’s land to build luxury housing, living large while the working class suffers, paying lawyers to turn wrong into right.

Not much has changed since Isaiah's song of disappointment. We still look for sweet wine and integrity; we still end up with injustice, crooked leaders, and blood.

God's response is to clear away the vineyard. Start from scratch. Send it back to nature. Let it produce food for wild animals and for passing flocks.

The Gospel reading is also about bitter disappointment. "Surely they will respect my own flesh and blood," says the owner. But he ends up being sorely mistaken. As Matthew tells it, this parable is about more than the moral failure of the chief priests and elders. "The kin-dom will be taken from you and given to a people who bear proper fruit." This is a parable about the collective punishment of the 1st century Jewish nation for rejecting and murdering Jesus. This parable lays the groundwork for that moment in Jesus' trial when "all the people say, 'His blood be on us and our children.'" It lays the groundwork in Matthew's vision of salvation history for that moment in AD 70, when the Romans lay waste to Judea and Jerusalem ends up burnt to the ground.

It's not hard for disappointment to turn into bitterness. It's not hard for bitterness to turn cold, hard, and vicious.

I find disappointment very hard to get over; probably because its roots are so deep in my childhood. I suppose that my parents could not help but disappoint me: just like me, they were born into a world of sexism, racism, and homophobia; a system where you compete and you sweat, or you fail. Maybe we inherit the disappointments of our parents. Maybe we inherit collective disappointments. Our country was built by some desperate people: immigrants driven to leave home and family; African slaves; Chinese workers; frightened settlers grabbing land from the double-crossed Natives. There's plenty of disappointment to go around.

How do we break out of disappointment? How do we clear away what has become bitter? How do we prevent disappointment from making *us* bitter, or vicious, or cold?

Maybe we can sing about it. Maybe we can write parables about it. Maybe we need to name it, if we want to get it out of our system.

We can do that in a serious way; and we can also be playful. In light of my own politics, I bought a Donald Trump dog toy. And once a day I've been taking a stick to it. This makes it easier for me to pray for his health.

St. Paul also has something to offer here. "Direct your thoughts to what is true, pure, and worthy." It's not enough to own up to our disappointment; we also need to point our lives in the direction of justice and wholeness; we need to let our attention be captivated by what is true and good.

Our disappointments will not soon be over. Whoever wins this election, whatever comes next, the challenges will keep coming. Some of those challenges we will overcome, and some of them won't turn out well.

I believe that we should not ignore our disappointments. And I also believe that our disappointments will not have the last word. As Paul says in another part of his writings, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through the one who has loved us. If we name them, and if we point our lives back toward justice and wholeness, then God of peace be with us.