

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 5th 2014

“Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard...

Then the God of peace will be with you.”

It would be entirely normal if, after listening to today’s readings, the first thing we noticed was how similar our first reading from Isaiah, the psalm, and our Gospel are. The same themes are repeated over and over again in those three readings: the preparation of the vineyard, the expectation of good fruit, anger at its absence. And although these similar themes no doubt have things to teach us – that we ought to bear good fruit ourselves, for example – it’s the differences that show up in-between the similarities that draw my attention.

Some of those differences are readily observable – there are no tenant farmers in Isaiah’s version of the story, for example. But others are a bit more hidden.

We can be helped to find some of them by taking a quick look at a worth-its-salt historical-critical commentary, and there we’ll find that it’s likely that Matthew (or whoever wrote the Gospel we heard today) has carefully redacted an earlier, simpler, parable of Jesus’ in order to make a point about his own community. But that point is pretty straightforward, too, it’s that, for Matthew, the tenants are the leaders of Israel, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Which makes the agents of the landowner the prophets who have been rejected and abused. A good historical commentary on what Matthew was after in this passage tells us that he wasn’t trying to repudiate Judaism itself, but it’s leadership. It’s to disempower them and to build up his own community that he wrote the final words we heard this morning: “Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.

If I were a betting man, I would bet that we already understood the passage just this way, partly because we’ve been trained into this interpretation over time, but also because of the psalm we just sang. (The refrain was: “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.”) Just like Matthew has done for his own readers, we’ve been prompted to hear Jesus’ words in the Gospel today as a sharp criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees, of those who led Israel while Jesus walked through its vineyards.

And it’s not that this is a wrong interpretation, or even a “bad” one, it’s that it keeps us from doing one thing: letting the critique it contains hit home. It keeps us from feeling the difference between, as St. Paul put it, allowing the “peace of God to guard our hearts and minds” and keeping the challenge of the Gospel at arms length.

We can see this clearly if we look carefully at two astounding things about the first reading we hear from Isaiah. First, that it exists at all, and second, the way it’s ending turns a simple song into a prophetic denunciation. And both of these show up for us better when we take our familiar interpretive lenses off and look at what’s there again.

If we’re able to do so the first thing we ought to notice is how astounding it is that something like this exists in the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s our familiarity with the prophets – vituperous language and

strange symbolic reenactments and all – that blinds us to how amazing it is that the prophetic books were preserved at all. Think about what they were and how they were preserved for a moment: these are writings in which Israel is repeatedly accused of betraying God, writing that were so inflammatory even at that time that some of them were burned and had to be rewritten (e.g., Jeremiah chapter 36), and it is Israel itself that preserves them.

What this means is that our older brothers and sisters in the covenant not only refused to hide from such prophetic challenges, they refused to forget them. They remembered, and allowed even such vituperous words as Isaiah's today to call them, again, back to fidelity. This is an astounding thing for which we should be grateful.

Second and lastly, we ought to notice what the text of Isaiah actually says and does when we take off our long-practiced interpretive lenses. When we can, we see that what we read in Isaiah wasn't originally a letter or an intellectual discourse, but a song. As scripture scholar Reginald Fuller calls it, a "song of the vineyard... composed by the prophet Isaiah during the early part of his ministry and was sung at vintage festivals." He goes on: "only the last stanza [of this song] equates the vineyard allegorically with Israel, thus turning a happy little song about country life into an expression of God's judgment upon his people."

We can imagine the scene: it is harvest time and the people are gathering with songs and excitement. The prophet begins to sing and everyone, nervous for a moment, begins to listen and to enjoy the song of the owner who can't get his vineyard to produce fruit. And just when they are comfortable, the final lines close fast upon them:

The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his cherished plant;
he looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed!
for justice, but hark, the outcry!

What we have here are two ways that we can reclaim some of the ferocity and courage of our Jewish brothers and sisters to face the prophetic call to honesty, repentance; holiness.

Our task is straightforward from here. We must, when we hear again Jesus' words through Matthew, refuse to allow ourselves to be too safe. We cannot allow a false peace that keeps us safe from such a challenge to "guard our minds and hearts." Instead, we must imitate our Jewish brothers and sisters and refuse to be coerced into taking on the role of the safely righteous. We must allow our imaginations to recreate the drama of the challenge that prophets issue and so refuse to let ourselves identify too quickly or solely with the "people that will produce [the] fruit" of the kingdom of God.

Of course none of this is to deny that we are a people already saved the loving grace of a merciful God. Yes, the church is a mystical body of the Lord, already gathered into God's arms. No the gates of hell will never prevail against us.

But such facts are in reality anything but contradictory to the interpretational vulnerability we have been practicing. Is it explicitly because we trust in God's goodness and not our own that we have the outrageous courage to expose ourselves – individually and communally, because we are ourselves both

loved and sinners and because our church is both holy and broken – to the voices of the prophets in the past and those in our midst today.

Just as our Jewish older brothers and sisters knew when they audaciously preserved the accusing words of the prophets, it is God's fidelity to the covenant made with us, God's love, that justifies us, not our holiness. Our only action is to accept this fidelity and to be as faithful as we can in turn.

Not so strangely, we have an example of just this in our readings today as well, again from the Hebrew Scriptures. Our psalm. In the verses between we heard sung these words:

Once again, O LORD of hosts,
look down from heaven, and see;
take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted
the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you;
give us new life, and we will call upon your name.

O LORD, God of hosts, restore us;
if your face shine upon us, then we shall be saved.

This is our practice. Our habit. To be open enough to hear the prophet's critical words, to hear Jesus' the prophets critical words, and still to trust that at the same time the merciful face of God shines upon us. This how, as St. Paul bid us, we "keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard. "This is how "the God of peace will be with [us]."

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