

Lectio Divina – 27th Sunday of the Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
 2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 21:33-43 - things to notice

- This Sunday's Gospel follows directly from last week's Gospel parable, spoken against the chief priests and the elders, warning religious leaders of the perennial danger of resistance to God's call and being unable to see God's work in progress.
- This Sunday's Gospel is another 'warning' parable – again spoken against the chief priests and the leaders of the people, but also meant for future leaders and disciples; again, a parable about the kingdom of God.
- The 'landowner' (absentee landlord) - notice the lavish story-telling here – plants a vineyard, puts up a fence, digs a wine press, builds a tower, and then leases the vineyard to tenants and goes abroad.
- As usual, he sends some servants to collect his share of the produce ('fruit' would be a better translation in the context of the parable – cf the last line of the Gospel '... given to a people who will produce its fruit'.
- Notice that in the following verses there is no indication that there is actually any produce to collect. It is possible that the tenants have done nothing with the wonderful vineyard leased to them except to allow it to fall into ruin.
- Notice the 3s: thrashed one, killed another and stoned a third.
- Next (no surprise here) the landowner sends a bigger group of servants, but they are dealt with in the same hard, wicked way.
- Then the landowner decides to send his son, whom he says the tenants will respect. The tenants leap to a surprising conclusion - that killing the son will enable them to take over the vineyard. However, the owner of the vineyard is still alive and can punish them.
- The son is seized, thrown out of the vineyard (important for Matthew's story that Jesus dies outside the walls of Jerusalem) and killed.
- Matthew then creates a dialogue in which the chief priests and elders, incriminated in the story, give judgement upon themselves: 'Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' They answered, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce (fruit) to him when the season arrives.' The chief priests and elders are condemned out of their own mouths.

- Jesus, the stone rejected by the builders (chief priests and elders) has become the key stone, like the wedge shaped stone in an arch which holds all the other stones together and supports them. This is God's doing and is wonderful to see – a quote from Psalm 118:22-23.
- The warning: The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.
- All is revealed: the vineyard is the kingdom of God; the landowner, God; the wicked tenants, the chief priests and elders; the servants, the prophets; the son, Jesus – who through rejected, is the chosen one of God who holds the new tenants (people – the church – the new people of God, the true Israel) together and on whom they are built, and who supports them in producing the fruit of the kingdom.
- So Matthew is presenting an allegory of salvation history in the parable.
- Note that the punishment pronounced by the chief priests and elders is not enacted by Jesus but replaced with the much milder statement that the kingdom shall be taken from them and given to others.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The First Reading is from the Prophet Isaiah: the Song of God's (my friend's) love for his Vineyard. It is a song of bitter disappointment that the vineyard tended with such loving care yielded only sour grapes. As in the parable, Isaiah invites his listeners into the conversation about the vineyard. Here the vineyard is revealed as the House of Israel, the vines as the people (men) of Judah. God expected the sweet fruit of justice, but found only bloodshed, and of integrity, but found only a cry of distress. God decides to destroy the vineyard.

Reflection

In last Sunday's parable, Jesus addressed the Jerusalem priests and elders with a message that "action speaks louder than words".

This Sunday, Jesus continues his address to them, building upon that message by using another parable.

This week's parable asks us how we have used the gifts that God has entrusted to us. It is essentially a parable about stewardship.

God has entrusted the kingdom to us, individually and collectively. We are expected to cultivate and manage this Kingdom life in such a way that it bears good fruit, fruit that we can present to God, the 'owner of the vineyard'.

There is nothing in the parable to indicate that there was any actual produce for the landowner to collect. It may very well be that the tenants had simply neglected the wonderful vineyard altogether and allowed it to fall into ruin.

Each of us has been given, not only the gift of life, but the wealth provided by God's grace – the very kingdom of God. Indeed, we have been privileged. However, with this privilege comes responsibility and we are ultimately responsible to God for the way we use or neglect the Kingdom within. We have to become a people who produce the fruit of the kingdom: love, mercy, justice, forgiveness, tolerance, hope, joy, deeds of loving kindness.

What will we do with the Kingdom that has been entrusted to us?

We pray that we may leave all the various 'vineyards' of our worlds in a better condition than how we were given them. Let us work to develop and sustain our awareness, seek out opportunities to contribute and then make judicious use of the gifts and grace that God has given us by letting God's grace be seen at work in us; and, through us, at work in the world.

We are stewards of the Kingdom and of God's grace. Let's not waste such a great gift.