



Fr Michael says:

The Barren Vineyard

We continue to explore these parables which are unique to Matthew, from his point of view, where the Jewish Tradition is beginning to fade, through the breakaway that occurs in the years 80 – 90 AD. He is picking up on the rich background of the Scriptures, which refer constantly to this situation of good landlord and bad tenants. It reflects how God deals with us; the Vineyard is Israel, of which Isaiah sings in the first reading. Paul underlines the best way of living the faith in present conditions, to allay anxiety and build confidence. The tenants are the People, especially the religious leaders; the servants are the warning, again it is ignored and the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem is fulfilled and so the Gentiles are now the People!

We can look at South Africa, a wonderful fertile and rich country, in so many ways, but it had become the haven of a few privileged people. Many people had tried to reform the situation fruitlessly, till Nelson Mandela, but he too was rejected (his imprisonment for 27 years) – but he survived this, was respected by his jailers and eventually won his freedom to lead his country to true freedom. The key point is that this was done without bitterness – he came out of prison, smiling! Immediately he sought reconciliation with his enemies. In the words of the psalmist, he became the corner stone of a new country! The ultimate message is that good, will overcome evil, justice overcomes oppression – this helps us understand and live the parable for ourselves. We see the history of salvation relived in it, yet despite killing the son, the people are not destroyed, but given to others, so that Christ could become the cornerstone! God never gives up on His People, despite everything; God persists till He gains a response! Good is the only way of overcoming evil. Jesus lived through this situation and so He knows what it is all about and because it happened to Him, it is good that we make Him our model for how we should live and love our faith and life: the challenge is for us to produce the fruit that He expects, in peace, justice and the ways of living harmoniously in our world.

“Lord, you planted me on this earth. You fenced me round with the love of family and friends – their care towered over me! In the shelter of this tower, I grew in safety and peace; I put out early blossoms; I filled up with leaves. People had great hopes for me. You had great hopes for me. Now, however, the year of my life is passing – the harvest is approaching. What fruit do I have to show? What if, after all this love and care, I had nothing to offer but sour grapes? May you, Lord, have mercy on me, and with your patient urging, help me to produce good fruits of love and service to you and those around me!”



Fr. Tom says:

“What do you want most in life?”

The noviciate that I went to in France had a large vineyard in which we had to work, mostly weeding and watering the vines. I did not learn very much about wine but marvelled at what grew from what like distorted, gnarled roots. The grapes that grew were rich and juicy. In both the Old and New Testament the chosen people were often likened to a vineyard which had to be worked at, cared for and nurtured for it to produce good grapes. Good grapes did not just happen. Vines have to be pruned right back to the original stump each year in order for them to produce healthy grapes the following year.

But the stories this week are not so much about vineyards but about the tenants and the choices they made. In the first story the tenants have everything done for them, they are given all the help they need but they only produce injustice, abuse their power, choose to be uncaring, self-centred and cruel with the result that they produce sour grapes devoid of happiness and life or any sense of good will and joy which is what the vineyard owner wanted for them. In the second story the tenants want everything for themselves when, in fact, the vineyard would produce more than enough for everyone and much more besides. In doing everything to keep it all for themselves even killing the son of the owner, they ending up losing everything.

The choice for God is always a choice for life, pure and simple. The Jesuits in Sacred Space tell us that each of us is like a book in which we write a new page every day. We choose what will be the central themes and how the different chapters of our book will unfold. They remind us that we are fortunate because we have God to help us with this work if we choose to let him. Only with him will we truly discover the rich treasures and gifts of our life and the uniqueness of what we have to offer to the larger picture which we have come to call the Kingdom of God. But remember! You cannot sit on the fence for this is equivalent to hiding your talent in the ground. The vines will grow whether you tend them or not but, uncared for, they will only produce sour fruit. The parable makes it clear that we choose either Life and embrace what God offers us or death and turn away from God. There is no middle ground!

It is all too easy to complain that there are too many areas of life that were not chosen by us: the time in which we were born, our circumstance in life, where we were born, our ethnicity etc. etc. But we do have a choice we can choose not only to embrace our circumstance in life but also to make something positive of it. (Think of how many successful businesses and businessmen came from lowly beginnings.) In fact we can make our lives it into something exceptional or as Jesus would put it into something amazing. Referring to himself as the cornerstone, he is the solid, secure and trustworthy base on which it is possible to build anything and everything and the possibilities are endless. At the same time, he trusts us, truly has faith in us to produce wholesome fruit that will benefit everyone. In the process of living this choice, we gradually cease to be tenants, working for the master, for we come to love the vineyard and the grapes and we will want do our very best to produce the best of grapes so that everyone will benefit and, as we do this, we will discover that we have come to see the owner as our father and his son as our brother. And this, in the end, is what we most want in life!!