

The Vineyard 13 Sunday of Matthew

Sometimes parables are open to different interpretations. This certainly is the case with today's lesson.

The Lord first spoke this parable during His lifetime. Probably it was a prediction of how He was to die. In this perspective the householder is God and the vineyard with a beautiful hedge was the land of Israel, God's kingdom. The tenants were the people of Israel; the servants that were sent and subsequently maltreated were the prophets. The householder, God, then sent His Son, whom they killed. At this point He punishes the tenants and opens the vineyard to others, who were not Jews.

St. Matthew wrote his gospel sometime in the decade of 70-80 AD. The people for whom he wrote were Christians of Jewish heritage. St. Matthew's gospel contains many references to Jewish scripture. One reason, perhaps, for this parable to be included was that it explained how the promises given to Abraham and his descendants were being extended to Gentiles. It also explained the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 70 AD. After the malicious treatment of the prophets and of His Son, God "put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."

What I have said so far is accurate and somewhat helpful, but it does not really address our lives today. But the parable has meaning now, for you and me. To discern this meaning, we ask three questions: Who is the owner? What is the property? Who are the tenants?

The first and third questions are related. Who is the owner? Who are the tenants? We are the tenants; God is the owner. Sometimes we forget that we are the tenants, and act as if we are the owners. It is a basic sin, going back to the conversation that Eve had with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The serpent tells Eve that she does not need God and need not follow His directives. "God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God," it tells her. The fallacy lies in the idea that we can be independent of God.

We believe that the universe has a Creator, a being who has given us small glimpses of who He is, a being beyond our understanding- "Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," in the words of our Creed. We humans are small creatures in an immense universe, and the span of our lives is minimal in terms of the universe's existence. We come, we go, and we take nothing with us. We are not owners, but tenants. So far I have stated the obvious, but I do so because human behavior often belies this truth.

I want to address the second question: What is the vineyard? One answer is that the vineyard is the world that we live in. God has placed us here to tend to His vineyard and to give back to Him some of the produce from it. The children that we raise, do they belong to us or to God? The accomplishments of our lives, the diplomas and credentials and businesses- whatever we do,

did we do it by ourselves or did God give us the abilities to do these things? The idea of Christian stewardship is that the money we make comes not only from our efforts but more importantly the abilities, the blessings, that God has given us.

The theological support for the environmentalist movement comes from this perspective. We do not own the world but are simply tenants. September 1 has been designated by Patriarch Bartholomaios as a day of prayer for the protection of the environment. Archbishop Demetrios wrote in a message for the day, "We acknowledge our responsibility to be good stewards of all that He has made. He has given us the resources, knowledge, and skill to address our physical needs and those of others, just as He is faithful to provide for our spiritual needs... We seek balance between our genuine needs and our care for our natural environment and each other. We offer a witness of our faith and guidance to others as we share and sustain, motivated by God's love and our love for all that He has made.

The vineyard can also be understood as the spiritual world that we occupy, the inner space of our souls. Do we fill our minds with interesting but empty pursuits? Sports? Television? Music? Or do we cultivate our inner lives and enrich them with holy pursuits, such as prayer, philanthropy, contemplation, and more? Do we share our faith with others? Do we allow God into our inner space, or do we fill it with superficial distractions?

Everything that we have is temporary. We are the tenants; God is the owner. God expects us to take what we are loaned and do something with it for His glory. God does most of the work, but He asks us to do something, too, to return His love and share His blessings.

Fr. Stephen J. Callos

Text: Matthew 21:33-42

The Lord said this parable, "There was a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country. When the season of fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants, to get his fruit; and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first; and they did the same to them. Afterward he sent his son to them, saying 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"