



Fr. Ambrose Bennett
Twenty-Seventh Sunday, Year A (2008)

CHRIST THE TRUE VINE

In today's gospel, our Lord speaks of his own people Israel as a vineyard. In using this image, Christ was using symbolism already familiar from the Hebrew prophets, as we heard in our first reading from Isaiah:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting (Is 5.7).

In recalling Israel's infidelity to the covenant and its unfruitfulness as the Lord's choice vineyard, the prophet Isaiah was summing up the history of Israel. As the Psalmist says,

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land (Ps 80. 8-9).

And so it was: Israel was constituted in holiness by the covenant that God made through Moses with his people at Mt. Sinai. God promised possession of the Promised Land under condition of obedience to his Law; but, as Isaiah tells us,

Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
sons who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged (Is 1.4).

The consequence of Israel's rebellion is exile, banishment from the land:

Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge;
their honored men are dying of hunger,
and their multitude is parched with thirst...
For they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel...
And if one look to the land,
behold, darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened by its clouds (Is 5.13, 24, 30).



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



How does this concern us, then? There are, after all, countless ancient peoples who had their day and have then left the stage of history, and whose names are largely forgotten. Why is the story of Israel of universal importance?

Because God made Israel a priestly people who would represent all mankind before God and through whom he would redeem and re-unite all mankind in the covenant. In its holiness, sin, exile, and restoration, Israel is the representative people for all humanity in its relation to God.

The pattern of Israelite history replicates in a representative way the events of the Book of Genesis: original holiness, sin, exile from the Garden, the promise of restoration (Gn 1-3). So also Israel begins at Mt. Sinai in a state of covenantal holiness, followed by sin, by exile and the death of the nation, and then a restoration. After having atoned for its sins and after having been purified through suffering, Israel rises again to new life and returns to the Promised Land. Up to this point, Jesus and his fellow Israelites shared a common understanding of Israel's mission in the world. But then Jesus takes the same pattern a step further: for Christ himself is the key to Israel's mission and to the redemption of the world.

In our Savior's parable, the landowner—God himself—has planted a good vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. The tenants have refused what was due to the landowner and instead beat and stoned and killed his servants the prophets. Finally, the landowner sends them his son, thinking that the tenants will at least respect him. But they think instead, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance" (Mt 21.38).

In this very way, Christ himself is exiled from his own people, to die outside the Holy city, cut off from his own people. Israel's own identity as a priestly people finds its highest fulfillment on the Cross of Christ, for Christ is the both the Victim and the Eternal High Priest.

The tenants of the vineyard have rejected the Son and cast out the true Vine from the vineyard; yet the Son has been raised from the dead, and the true vineyard is where Christ, the true Vine, is found. Christ himself said to his disciples before his passion:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples (Jn 15.5-8).



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The Good Friday liturgy takes up again the words of the prophet Isaiah and applies them to us, in words that cut us to the heart:

O my people, what have I done to you? or wherein have I offended you? Answer me! Because I led you out of the land of Egypt, you have prepared a Cross for your Savior. What more should I have done for you that I have not done? I myself planted you to be my fairest vineyard: and you have made yourself exceedingly bitter to me. For you have slaked my thirst with vinegar, and pierced with a lance your Savior's side.

For the warnings of the prophets of old still apply to us, the people of the New Covenant: we, too, dare not presume upon God's mercy or be slow in bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance and also the fruits of charity. St. Augustine, in contemplating the Savior crucified between two robbers, said, "Do not despair, for one of the robbers was saved. Do not presume, for one of the robbers was lost."

Let us then take heed: the warning of divine judgment applies to us, for we must remain united to the living Vine which is Christ. The Letter to the Hebrews tells how we are to combine a fitting fear of the Lord's judgment with trust in the Savior: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12.28).