

THE VINEYARD TENANTS GOD'S MESSENGERS

**September 6, 2009
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision C**

**GOSPEL: Matthew 21:33-42
EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 16:13-24**

Today's Gospel lesson is also found in Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19. This Gospel lesson, usually from Matthew, is commonly used in the West in late September. Today's Epistle lesson is not used in the West at all.

GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 21:33-42 – God's Messengers

The setting for the Gospel lesson is the middle of Holy Week. Jesus came to the Temple to teach and was confronted by the chief priests and elders. They asked Him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" (Matthew 21:23). Jesus answered, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: the Baptism of John – where was it from? From heaven or from man?" (vv.24, 25).

They reasoned that if they said "from heaven", He will say, "Why then did you not believe him?" But they also reasoned that if they said, "from men", the multitudes may stone them to death, for they all count John as a prophet. Therefore they answered, "We do not know." And Jesus didn't tell them by what authority He worked either (vv. 25-27).

This exchange indicates their hardness of heart. They knew that John was a prophet and his baptism was from heaven. They even sought to be baptized by John (Matthew 3:7-12) but John refused to baptize them because they rejected the will of God for themselves (Luke 7:30).

Immediately following this, Jesus directed two parables at them, the second of which is the Gospel lesson. The first parable was about a man who had two sons; he asked both to work in his vineyard that day. The first son said, "No!" but later regretted it and went. The second son said he would go but did not. Asking the chief priests and elders what they thought, Jesus asked, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" (vv. 28-31).

They answered, of course, "the first." Jesus replied that tax collectors and harlots were entering the kingdom of God before them. Explaining this, He stated that John came to Israel as the Forerunner in the way of righteousness but they did not believe him. Tax collectors (of whom the author Matthew was one) and harlots believed him (vv.31-32).

John Chrysostom (4th Century) explains it thus: John the Baptist came to them and they did not accept him. He did not come to the tax collectors and harlots, but they received him. Even after this, they did not become jealous and enter in. Thus the Lord said (Matthew 19:30): “The first shall be last and the last first” (Homily LXVII on Matthew 21).

The imagery of the vineyard was carried over into the second parable also; where the vineyard represents the entire Old Covenant relationship of Israel to the Lord. Isaiah used a very similar parable (Isaiah 5:1-7) where “the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel” (Isaiah 5:7). John the Baptist was one of the messengers the Lord sent to His vineyard. In iconography, John is depicted having wings like an angel since the word “angel” means messenger (Malachi 3:1).

In the second parable Jesus told (our Gospel lesson), a certain landowner planted a vineyard, set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. Recent excavations have shown that the purpose of the tower was similar to that of a wine cellar today for aging wine. The expectation, then, was quality wine!³ He then leased it to vinedressers and went to a far country. At various times He sent His servants to receive fruit from it but the vinedressers beat, killed and stoned them. Finally, He sent His Son saying, “They will respect My Son.” But the vinedressers said, “This is the Heir, let us kill Him and seize His inheritance”; and they did so (vv.33-39).

Jesus then asked them what the owner of the vineyard will do to the vinedressers when He comes. They replied, “He will destroy those wicked men miserably and lease His vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to Him the fruits in their seasons” (vv.40-41).

Taking them at their own words, just as the Prophet Nathan had done with King David (2 Samuel 12:1-10; compare Luke 19:22), the Lord said, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:22, 23; compare Isaiah 28:16). He continued, “The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” “And whoever falls on this (corner)stone will be broken, but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (vv.42-44).

At this, they tried to lay hands on Jesus, but couldn’t do it publicly because the crowds regarded Jesus as a Prophet (v.46). Two days later on Maundy Thursday, they were able to lay hands on Him at night, thanks to Judas’ betrayal (Matthew 26:47ff).

In this parable there is some important imagery that applies to us today. The vineyard is the Kingdom of God on earth, and the vinedressers then were the chief priests and the elders. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (v.43). the Church is now that nation as the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) and has been given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16:19, 18:18).

The hedge around the vineyard was the Mosaic Law, which tended to keep outsiders out and the faithful in. The fruit produced by the vineyard, in the words of John Chrysostom was “their obedience, the proof of it by their works” (Ibid.). To this end the vineyard had a winepress

³ Walsh, Carey, “God’s Vineyard” Bible Review, Aug. 1998, pg. 43-49.

(v.33) to help extract the maximum from the fruit and a tower as a beacon to the world (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:1, 28:12; Isaiah 42:6). A practical purpose of the tower in ancient vineyards was to provide a cool quiet place for aging the wine. The implication of the vineyard in the Gospel lesson is that quality wine will be produced.

John Chrysostom comments: “He left little for them to do but to take care of what was there and to preserve what was given to them.... For when they came forth out of Egypt, He gave a Law, and set up a city, and built a Temple and prepared an altar. By His going into a far country, He means His great long-suffering and not always bringing the punishments close upon their sins” (Ibid.).

The servants He sent to receive the fruits were the prophets. “But they even here showed their wickedness, not only failing to give the fruit, after having enjoyed so much care, but also by showing anger towards them that came. They not only were angry for no reason, but even filled their hands with blood; and while deserving punishment, themselves inflicted punishment (compare Matthew 23:37). Therefore He sent both a second and a third company both that the wickedness of these might be shown, and the love towards man of Him who sent them” (Ibid.).

Today we have a similar situation, where the priests and bishops have taken the place of the prophets as the Lord’s servants sent to receive the fruit of the vineyard. How many times do they urge us to forgive one another, to embrace and to be reconciled within the Body of Christ (the vineyard), but we refuse. In the Lord’s eyes, refusal to reconcile and forgive is as bad as murder (Matthew 5:21-26).

Other examples of the fruit of the vineyard are our words of praise to God (Hebrews 13:15), and our deeds that show love to our brothers and sisters (Matthew 25:31-46)

Finally, the landowner sent His son, saying, “They will respect My Son” (v.37). Why should He say this after such a long history of abusing the prophets? Chrysostom’s comments are (1) that this is what they ought to have done, (2) that this is another extension of the Lord’s long-suffering, and (3) that they might fill up the measure of their fathers’ guilt (Matthew 23:29-32) and be without excuse (compare Isaiah 1:15, Hosea 4:2, Micah 3:10). To this one might add in all the incredible miracles Jesus performed. Certainly this should have generated considerable respect.

The inheritance that the vinedressers – and the chief priests – wanted to seize was control of the Kingdom of God on earth. This was why Satan was so eager to crucify the Son of God (1 Corinthians 2:7-8) and why he was willing to trade all the kingdoms of the world for it (Matthew 4:8-10).

As to what the landowner will do to the wicked vinedresser, the chief priests’ reply was prophetic. They themselves are now in hell (Matthew 23:34-36) and the vineyard has been leased to other vinedressers who are expected to render to Him the fruits in their seasons (vv.41-43). The fruits vary from season to season: sometimes fasting and repentance; other times feasting and thanksgiving. If we, like them, refuse to render to Him the fruit He expects, He may lease the vineyard to others also. Paul uses a similar analogy: the grafting of the Gentiles as branches into a cultivated olive tree and cutting off the natural branches. “Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either” (Romans 11:16-26).

The chief priests realized the impact of what Jesus was saying: that is, the Kingdom of God being given to others. Luke records their reaction as “may it never be!” (Luke 20:16). But the Lord quoted Psalm 118:22-23 about the Stone which the builders (the chief priests) rejected becoming the chief cornerstone and how “this was the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23, Matthew 21:42). This Psalm was also quoted by the Apostle Peter in testifying before the Sanhedrin a few months later (Acts 4:8-12) and by Peter later in his first Epistle (1 Peter 2:6-8; see also Ephesians 2:20).

Jesus concluded the parable by combining some prophecies about Himself. He said, “Whoever falls on this stone will be broken, but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (v.44). The falling and being broken is explained by Isaiah as Israel stumbling over the stone (Isaiah 8:14-15; quoted in 1 Peter 2:8). Chrysostom says this stumbling includes being offended by the stone (Ibid.).

The grinding to powder is a reference to Daniel’s prophecy about the stone that was cut out of the mountain without hands (Daniel 2:31-45). This stone promptly crushed all the great kingdoms of the world until no trace was found of them and the wind carried them away (like dust blows away). Chrysostom linked Daniel’s prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem in c. 70 AD (Ibid).

How about us? Are we offended by some things the Scripture teaches? Do we have little areas of our lives that are off limits? When God’s messengers come to us in our part of the vineyard and expect fruit in its season, we need to be ready to receive them, to welcome what they say and to thank God for His bounty. As the Lord said, “He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward” (Matthew 10:41).

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EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 16:13-24

Today's Epistle lesson is not used in the West at all.

Background for the Church in Corinth

Paul founded the Church in Corinth about 51 AD toward the end of his Second Missionary Journey and stayed there a year and a half (Acts 18:11). Silas was traveling with Paul at the time along with Luke, Timothy and Andronicus, where all but Paul were of the original Seventy. Luke was left behind to oversee the Macedonian Churches. (Note switch in tenses from "we" to "they" and back to "we" in Acts 16:16, 17:1, 20:6). Silas was left behind in Corinth and was later Bishop of Corinth. (Note that we never hear from Silas again traveling with Paul after he arrived in Corinth, Acts 18:5).

Before Paul arrived in Corinth for an extended stay again in late 55 AD, he wrote four letters to Corinth (two of which are lost) and paid the Church one brief visit. For more details on this sequence of events, see the Epistle lesson for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. In the interval from 52 to 55 AD, Apollos and the Apostle Peter visited Corinth. Apollos was one of the original Seventy, but must have been back home in Alexandria at the time of Pentecost. He knew only the baptism of John in 53 AD when he came to Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28). Aquila and Priscilla, the overseers Paul left in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19), straightened Apollos out and also wrote to the Churches in Achaia (Athens and Corinth) to receive Apollos when he arrived (Acts 18:27). Apollos proceeded to help out by vigorously refuting the Jews publicly showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 18:28). In 1 Corinthians 3:8, Paul said that he and Apollos are one; that is, of one mind in the work of establishing the Churches.

The same can be said for the relationship between Paul and Peter. Peter visited Corinth in the early 50's on his way to Rome. He obviously made a big impression in Corinth since there were factions that had developed by 55 AD (1 Corinthians 1:12) centered around Paul, Apollos, Peter and none of the above (i.e. Christ!!) On Peter's way to Corinth, Paul met him in Macedonia and together they ordained four bishops:

Olympas	Philippi
Jason	Thessalonica
Silas	Corinth
Herodion	Patras (SW Greece)

Thus we can definitely say that Peter and Paul were one in the work also.

From a detailed study of Paul's Missionary Journeys (Appendix A), we see that Paul worked with at least 60 of the original members of the Seventy at some point. Many of them like Luke, Timothy, and Titus traveled with him a lot. In addition, Paul had some contact with Peter, John, Andrew and Philip.

Examples of God's Messengers

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul had some major issues to deal with. Among them:

- Factions: Four rival groups competing (1 Corinthians 1:12ff)
- Immorality: Incest worse than the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 5:1ff)
- Quarrels: Virgins vs. Married (1 Corinthians 7:1ff)
Food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1ff)
- Heresy: Gnostics denying the resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12ff)

Since communication and travel was much slower than today, Paul had to depend on messengers to tell him what was going on and to bring some words of correction and instruction back. Among these messengers were Timothy (4:17; 16:10, 11), Apollos (16:12), and Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:15-17). All of these except Stephanas were members of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-24). These messengers played the same role as the servants in the Gospel lesson whom the Lord sent to the vineyard to receive the fruits of it.

The Epistle lesson is the conclusion to a long letter that covered many things. Paul summarizes this by reminding us that one of the messages we carry is the love of God and that we should do all things out of love (16:14) as he had mentioned earlier in the Epistle (13:1-13). John Chrysostom commented on this as follows:

“For if this had not been neglected, they would not have been puffed up, they would not have said, ‘I am of Paul, and I of Apollos.’ If this had existed, they would not have gone to law before heathens, or rather they would not have gone to law at all. If this had existed, that notorious person would not have taken his father's wife; they would not have despised the weak brethren; there would have been no factions among them; they would not have been vain-glorious about their gifts. Therefore it is that he says, ‘Let all things be done in love’” (Homily XLIV on 1 Corinthians 16).

From there, Paul gives an example of love in the household of Stephanas. Paul had baptized Stephanas' household (1:16) and referred to them as the firstfruits of Achaia (16:15). Achaia was a large area and included Corinth and Athens. Epaenetus, another of the Seventy, was also mentioned as the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ (Romans 16:5) in the Epistle to the Romans that was written perhaps a year later. If Stephanas' household and Epaenetus were both firstfruits of Achaia, then it may be that Epaenetus was part of Stephanas' household, that this was a beginning monastic community, and the Fortunatus and Achaicus had joined them. They had “devoted themselves to the ministry (literally the Deaconate) of the saints” (16:15) in a church where remaining a virgin was strongly encouraged (7:1, 25-38). Paul had to write to tell them that it's really okay to marry – as if some thought it was sinful (7:28).

In addition to using Stephanas' household as an example of love and good works, Paul asked the Corinthians to submit to them and to others who work in the apostolic ministry with them. This is in contrast to the vinedressers in the Gospel lesson who beat, killed and stoned God's messengers. Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, on the other hand, "refreshed Paul's spirit and that of the Corinthians by supplying what was lacking on the part of the Corinthians" (16:17-18). Chrysostom stated that "they had chosen to undertake so great a journey on behalf of the Corinthians" and that "they bore about in themselves the whole city" (Ibid).

Paul also recalled old times by saying that "Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord" (v.19). Aquila and his wife Priscilla were some of the first people Paul met in Corinth when he founded the Church there about four years earlier (Acts 18:1-3). They also had been numbered with the Seventy and were well-known to the Corinthians. As Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, the Church was meeting in Aquila's house in Ephesus. A year or so later, Paul wrote to the Church in Rome where the Church was meeting there in Aquila and Priscilla's house also (Romans 16:3-5). They were sent to Rome with a number of others by Peter and Paul to help start the Church in Rome.

To tie this together, Paul said to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (16:20). This is a reference to "the kiss of peace that was used in all the ancient Liturgies of the Church just before and as part of the Holy Eucharist" (Editor's footnote to Chrysostom's Homily XLIV on 1 Corinthians 16).

As a word of warning, however, Paul said, "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed" (16:22). Chrysostom's comment on this is: "By this one word he strikes fear into all: those who made their members the members of a harlot; those who put stumbling blocks in the way of their brethren by the things offered in sacrifice unto idols; those who refuse to believe the resurrection. And he not only strikes fear, but also points out the way of virtue and the fountain of vice. Namely, when our love towards Him has become intense, there is no kind of sin that is not extinguished and cast out thereby; so when it is too weak it causes all kinds of sin to spring up" (Ibid.).

Thus we are God's messengers and we receive God's messengers. God's messengers are there for our benefit and we need to receive them as such. They will refresh our spirit and we need to acknowledge them (16:18). By doing so, the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will continue to be with us.