

27th. Sunday in Ordinary Time

I've been thinking this week about what gathers people together and makes them one. 100,000 people gathered last Saturday afternoon to watch the AFL grand final. Every one of them, no matter who they were supporting on the day, would now identify themselves as the people who were there when Richmond won the flag after 37 years. 22,000 people gathered for a country music festival in Las Vegas on Sunday night. Everyone who survived would forever remember that they belonged to a group that on that night had been targeted by a gunman with automatic weapons. But it is not just events that we experience together that make us one.

The people of Israel identified themselves because of God's special relationship with them. They thought of themselves as the people that God called his own. No matter what they did the God of Israel remained faithful to them. There are many images of the People of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures, but one of the most powerful ones is that of a vineyard. We meet this image in our reading from the Book of Isaiah today. "Let me sing to my friend the song of his love for his vineyard. He dug the soil, cleared it of stones, and planted choice vines in it. In the middle he built a tower, he dug a press there too." It is a picture of devotion to a people that God loved.

But the people of Israel did not live up to the expectations that God had for them. Many of them did not produce the fruit that God expected of them. "He expected justice, but found bloodshed, integrity, but only a cry of distress." God threatens to allow his beloved vineyard to be trampled on and go to ruin. What do we think of when we see the many vineyards that have been planted in our area? We look beyond the grapes to the wine that they will become. The vineyards are only there to produce good wine for us.

Jesus uses that image of the vineyard again in our gospel today. He tells his parable about a vineyard as an expression of his great disappointment in the leadership of the people of Israel. Jesus loved his own people deeply and felt the pain of them being led by those who were not listening to God.

It is difficult for us to reconstruct the original parable that Jesus must have told. The early Church community and then Matthew himself must have built upon Jesus words to tell not so much a parable as an allegory where every part of the story can be given some meaning. The vineyard is God's people. The tenants are those in leadership. The servants are the prophets. Jesus himself is the son. We notice that the son is killed outside of the vineyard as Jesus was killed outside the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus invites the religious leaders to complete the story. They pronounce judgement on themselves. “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him when the season arrives.” We can’t help but think that Matthew had in mind the wretched end that the people of Jerusalem had when their city was destroyed in 70 AD.

Jesus then likens himself to the stone that was rejected by the builders because it didn’t fit into the wall. It was the wrong shape. But it was just the right shape to become the cornerstone or the keystone that held the arch together. Jesus concludes his story to the leaders by telling them that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

What Jesus says is directed against the leadership of God’s people in his time. Because of their stubborn hearts the kingdom of God is to be handed over to a people made up of Jews and Christians who are open to what Jesus is offering to them. We are called to be part of that people. But we cannot be complacent. We have to produce the fruit that our union with Jesus is meant to produce. People have the right to say to us, “What have you got to show for being a follower of Jesus?

What is the good that you do because you are a Christian? What difference do you make to the society in which you live? What’s the point of being a Christian?

We answer those questions as best we know how by the way that we live. We ask Jesus to keep renewing his life in us so that we can bear fruit. We know that we fail at times. We know that we need God’s forgiveness and his strength to live as followers of Jesus. It is his love for us that makes us the people that we are called to be. It is the gift of his grace that makes us disciples of Jesus.

We live in a very challenging but much graced time in history. We are part of a Church that is hearing the call to renewal in a more radical way than we have heard it for a long time. We have been gifted with Pope Francis as our leader in this renewal. He is helping us ask the questions of why we are Church today, and what we offer to our world. He is helping us to identify that it is our union with Jesus that unites us to one another and makes us Church. What we experience together is a deep sense of being loved by God. Today we renew our love for Him. We renew our commitment to be the vineyard of the Lord. We ask the Lord to bless the harvest so that we can become the good wine that the world needs today.