

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-42

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel we heard the parable of the vineyard, and how the Master lent out the vineyard out to vinedressers expecting to receive its fruits in due season. Yet as the parable explains, the vinedressers not only did not return the fruits of the vineyard, but they also beat, killed, and stoned both the Master's servants and even the Master's own Son. And for this, the wicked vinedressers were utterly destroyed and the vineyard was lent out to new vinedressers who would render the fruits in due season.

Every parable of God, every teaching of God, and every word of God is given within a certain context, at a certain time and place, and to a certain person or group of people, yet the spiritual message always has universal truth and requires personal application. Of this fact, St. Paul writes to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished to every good work."

The Lord spoke today's parable to the Pharisees, the chief priests, and rulers of the Jewish nation, soon after He had entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and was going to His voluntary Passion and Death on the Cross.

We recall that after entering the city, the Lord cleansed the Temple, casting out all those who sold and bought therein, overthrowing the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves, and delivering the chastisement, "My house shall be called the house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves."

We know how the Lord then continued on walking with His disciples, and finding a fig tree, which had no fruit, He said to the fig tree, "Let no fruit grow on you forever." And immediately, in the sight of the marveling disciples, the fig tree withered away.

And then the Lord delivered another short parable to the Pharisees, this one too about a vineyard. The Lord said, "But what do you think? A man had two sons; and he came to the first and said, Son, go work in my vineyard today. He answered and said, I will not. But afterwards he repented and went. And he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir; and did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said to Him, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you that the tax-collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you [for they bore fruits of repentance]."

And then, only after cleansing the Temple of those who made it a den of thieves, after causing the fig tree to wither away because it bore no fruit, and after delivering the parable about the Father's vineyard and His obedient and disobedient sons, did the Lord finally speak the parable in today's Gospel.

When we consider the parable in its full context, we can, like the Pharisees, chief priest, and rulers of the Jewish nation, more easily understand the Lord's message.

Without a doubt, the Lord was telling the Jewish leaders, that the time of their rule was about to come to an end. They had been entrusted with the responsibility of cultivating the Lord's vineyard, that is, of helping God's chosen people bring forth fruits of righteousness, love, and gratitude for their Master. But instead they turned the Temple into a place of merchandise and thievery, and they rejected their Master, God Himself, who had sent to them His servants, the prophets, and even His own Son, the Word of God Incarnate.

Yet, as terrible as this all is, the Jewish religious leaders, did do one thing right. For, as the Gospel of Matthew records, "when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they knew that He spoke of them" – they recognized that they were worthy of rebuke.

To be sure, they were angry that the Lord had spoken this parable against them, but at least they did not justify themselves, at least they were as the Scriptures say "cut to the heart". At least they experienced what St. Paul would later write to the Hebrews, that "the Word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Brothers and Sisters, when the Lord spoke the parable of the vineyard to the Jewish leaders in the city of Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago, He spoke to them within a certain context – He spoke to them within the context of their stewardship under the Old Covenant – a covenant which they had broken, a covenant which would be reestablished with a different people in a new and better way, a covenant which they would no longer take part in, a covenant to which we ourselves have become heirs.

Yet, this was not the last time the Lord spoke this parable to His chosen people. For the Lord continually speaks this parable to the new stewards of His vineyard – to us, the new Israel, the Church of God.

To be sure, the context is different, but the message is the same.

We have become stewards of His vineyard. He is our Master and we are His servants. The fruits that He commands us to bring forth are the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control.

In the Gospel of John, Christ says, "I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, [My Father] takes away. And every one that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bring forth more fruit."

There is something of a mystery here, for in one case, we are the stewards of the vineyard, and in the other case, God Himself is the Vinedresser and we are the branches. So which is it? Are we stewards or are we branches? Of course, the answer is that we are both. For we are called to bring forth fruit as branches abiding in Christ who is the

True Vine, and we are also called to work with God, serving one another as stewards of each other's salvation, helping one another to bring forth fruit in abundance.

Brothers and Sisters, the Church places before us the parable of the Master's vineyard for two reasons.

First, so that we might understand what happened so many years ago, how the once chosen people of God fell from their high calling and were cast out of the Lord's vineyard and utterly destroyed because they sought to seize the vineyard for themselves. They sought to make the Temple a place of merchandize, they had no desire to bring forth fruits of repentance, and they even crucified the Master's Son – the Lord Jesus Christ.

And second, so that we might realize that what happened to the Jewish nation could easily happen to us. It could happen to us if we try to make the vineyard our own, forcing our ways upon the Church, rather than submitting to the ways of God. It could happen to us, if we do not show ourselves as good stewards of the Lord's vineyard by rendering Him spiritual fruits, by accepting His prophets, those who fulfill the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, and by receiving Christ as the True Vine who desires to be firmly implanted into the soil of our hearts.

And so, let us understand the context in which the parable was delivered to the Jewish nation, and let us also understand the context in which the parable has been delivered to us. And if we have been imitating the Pharisees and chief priests in their desire to make the vineyard their own, let us also imitate the Pharisees and chief priest in their recognition that the Lord has spoken this parable against them. And let us have ears to hear and let us reform our ways.

The Scripture says very clearly, "now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire." Let us resolve then to abide in Christ, the True Vine, and through Him bear good fruit. And let us recommit ourselves to becoming good stewards of the Lord's vineyard, learning and keeping His ways, and helping one another to bring forth fruit in abundance.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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