

Pentecost XII (20C)  
*Isaiah 5.1-10/Hebrews 11.1-17-12.2/Luke 12.49-59*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
19 August 2007

God's Vineyard

~Paul H. Friesen~

Our family is friends with another family—not of this parish and not Anglicans, but a Christian family. The children are the age of our children. But the parents have very different vocations than we do: public health and computer systems. Given their professions we were a little surprised at how chaotic and messy their home was, not having severe standards ourselves. Vacuuming is not a priority for our friends, nor washing up right after breakfast, or lunch, or dinner. In some parts of the house one might need to wade through toys. Yet this doesn't seem to concern them much. A stranger might draw certain conclusions about them given the state of their house.

But if you know our friends only a bit, you know certain things. They are, in the end, conscientious about the repair and maintenance of their house and yard. But far more importantly how they spend time speaks of their priorities—days off, flexible work schedules, and so on, all to be able to spend time with their children. And they have lots of time to talk with you if you are picking up or dropping off your children at their home. How our friends choose to use their time is the best measure—what comes first, and what comes second. This is the best way to draw conclusions about them.

This morning's reading from the Prophet Isaiah leaves us with a similar question: When God looks at our lives, what does God see? How does God see the creatures God made in his image, and blessed with so many things as they grow? Last Sunday we talked through some Scriptures that pictured God as a Father, full of love and grief for his children. Though often ignored by them, God still wanted nothing more, than for these children to hear him call out their names.

This Sunday we hear Isaiah say that God pictures us not only as God's children, but as a vineyard. If you don't think that is particularly special, talk to a Frenchman whose family has planted a vineyard, and has cared for it across ten generations. God, like the Master of a cherished vineyard, has poured his heart and soul into it.

This is no chemically-based operation delegated to an agricultural multinational while God pursues other interests. God sees his ancient people, Israel, and hence his later children, Christians, as a choice vineyard. God has a relationship with it. The vineyard reflects God's character.

We could get distracted by Isaiah's introduction. We hear (in most translations) that he is about to sing a love-song to his beloved. And it is true that the language of romantic love, applied to God has deep roots in our faith. But it has been well argued, because of the very different ways that the Hebrew words are used here, a different sort of translation is appropriate—perhaps something like: 'Let me sing a charming little ditty about you to my dear friend God.'<sup>1</sup>

In any case, once Isaiah has our attention about his intimate relationship with God, he describes the real object of God's affection, God's vineyard. And then he lets God take over and sings in God's voice about God's vineyard.

Isaiah spares no steps, and no details in his song which takes the form of an ancient parable. God chooses the site for the vineyard, the best most fertile hill on his estate. With his bare hands God tills its soil and hauls away the stones. And then God plants it with the most precious and rare vines, hoping for great things. He builds no shack, but a proper winery with a large vat chiselled out of stone. 'What more was there to do for my vineyard,' we hear God say later, 'that I have not done in it?'

But here, out of the blue, Isaiah's little song goes off-key. We're told in some translations that wild, uncultivated grapes take over the vineyard. Or the more likely Hebrew translation should be used; late in the season, the grapes become diseased and inedible, no good for wine—a bitter disappointment.<sup>2</sup> How could this be? God had put so much of himself into it.

Still, Israel has not been named as the vineyard, though the nation, Isaiah's audience, is clearly meant to know their nation is God's vineyard. Isaiah begins to sing in God's voice to his fellows, as if God was singing about some other people in this clever parable. 'Judge between me and my vineyard,' God says to the people through Isaiah.

God's words are severe. The ungrateful vineyard shall be allowed to degenerate by its master—hedges and walls will break down, no rain will bless it, the vines shall not be pruned or weeded. Ten acres, we're told, will yield one miserable *bath* of wine, that is, about six American gallons. The general condition of the vineyard will come to reflect the pathetic, ungrateful yield of the grapes.

The interpretation of this curious parable comes clear at the end: 'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts,' says Isaiah, 'is the house of Israel...[God]

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<sup>1</sup> See H.G.M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), Vol.I, p.331-335.

<sup>2</sup> Williamson, *Isaiah 1-27*, Vol.I, p.338.

expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!...Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.'

The meaning is plain. God's vineyard, his people, was created when God liberated his people, as we heard in the psalm for today: 'You brought a vine of out Egypt...you cleared the land for it; it took deep root and filled the land.'<sup>3</sup>

But God's people have become oppressive to each other, through greed ruining the divine pattern whereby ever family was meant to have its home and its land. All that is left is from the proceeds of fraudulent commerce, one neighbour abusing another, is large and beautiful houses—but desolate, empty house like the house of Jay Gatsby in that great novel, the magnificent house with the fake library and no real soul, and without even its master at the end.

This is what God sees, says Isaiah, when he looks at the human vineyard he planted, and cultivated, and nurtured and loved. He sees ungrateful hearts turned against each other.

What does God see when God sees the church? Does God see his image in us—does he see Christ? Christians have learned the hard way, over the centuries, to listen to the ancient prophets and to their own prophets. We have been reminded of this several times, in different ways by St. Paul.

Perhaps we need to hear this in the wonderful phrase of the *King James' Translation* once again: 'We are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.'<sup>4</sup>

We are God's vineyard, God's work of craftsmanship; meant to yield grapes and meant to produce works of art ourselves. God wants to see himself reflected in us. It seems preposterous to say the creator of the universe wants to see himself in us, but the Bible is full of references to this.

Perhaps our problem is that we think God wants to see neat and tidy lives, or glorious spiritual facades, or sin-free, problem-free families, or certain kinds of obvious success in our work-lives. There are versions of Christianity being sold that promise this. But the God of Isaiah wasn't interested in this, nor the God of the author of *Hebrews*.

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<sup>3</sup> *Psalm* 80.8-9. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

<sup>4</sup> *Ephesians* 2.10.

Whose faith was commended? If you read the stories of these heroes you won't find visible perfection. We all know about the deep flaws and sins of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, related to us in detail by the Scriptures—the same is true for Moses and Samuel and David. But there are others named in the Epistle who seem difficult to admire: Rahab the prostitute, Gideon the doubtful and reluctant commander, Samson who lived a riotous life and broke his parents' hearts, and Jephthah who rashly promised and sacrificed his daughter. Yet they are among the 'great cloud of witnesses', the saints who cheer us on.

What did God see of himself in this strange crew? What does God see of himself in us? Well, God didn't applaud their sin, but God certainly commended their acts of faith in difficult circumstances. God proudly saw them as his vineyard.

God has invested so much in each of us, whether we have recognized it or not. The ancient theologian Theodoret put it this way about the list of saints we have just heard: 'Lawlessness of life did not prevent salvation: faith covered the wounds of sin.'<sup>5</sup>

This doesn't mean that God kindly overlooks major failings and saves us on the basis of one brilliant and selfless act—this is the justification for the lives of many dangerous but famous people. What it means is that God delights in acts of faith by the people in whom God has invested so much.

God has created us, and through Christ God has redeemed us—that is God has re-created us, reformed our hearts. And God's grace is never withdrawn. It is in the strength of this love that he has made us his vineyard. It is in this strength that we find we can be faithful in spite of all the flaws and tragedies and sins around us and within us.

So we give thanks in the Eucharist, the act of thanksgiving. We give thanks not only that this wine is the life of Christ given to us as a gift, but that God has made us his vineyard, and desires us to be the best wine, the gift that refreshes the world. God's desire is too see his labours and himself in us, his well-loved creatures.

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<sup>5</sup> Theodoret of Cyr, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Hebrews*, ed. Erik H. Heen and Philip Krey (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 200.