

Sunday 5th October 2014 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		17th Sunday after Pentecost 27th Sunday of the Year A
Isaiah 5:1-7	Ps 80:7-15	Phil 3:4b-14
		Matt 21:33-46
BEARING FRUIT		

“Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation that yields the proper fruit.” (Matt 21:44)

When I was about nine years old, we as a family moved from Pietermaritzburg, where I had been born, to Stellenbosch. My parents bought a piece of ground, about 16 acres, a small holding rather than a farm. It was desolate and had never been farmed or ploughed – covered with pine trees and renosterbos, dry and hot in summer, mostly clay soil, not very fertile, and those early years on the land were very hard work, clearing the bush, planting grass and trees, building a house. When my parents finally retired, and sold the place, it was transformed – tall shady trees, a well-established farm, home and outbuildings, a life time of work that had borne much fruit.

Don't we all long for results? To see the fruit of our labour? To know that what we have poured ourselves into, what we have given our lives for, has been worthwhile?

Isaiah 5:1-7 – God's vineyard

In our readings, both Isaiah and Matthew use images of the vineyard, the farmer or the landowner, the tenants, the harvest, the results, the produce.

For Isaiah, the vineyard is the symbol of Israel and Judah, the chosen people of God. God has cared for them, protected them, planted them in good soil, blessed them. The vineyard planted in good soil and guarded by God is a picture of their salvation as a nation – their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, their journey across the Red Sea

and through the wilderness, into the Promised Land. They can look back over their history as a nation, as the people of God, and see how God has been with them.

But their life as a nation does not reflect or show forth the fruit, the qualities, the results, that were expected. The society is no longer living out the values or the ethics of the people of God. Instead of the choice grapes that were hoped for – grapes that were sweet, and delicious to eat, full of juice and flavour, refreshing - all that was found when it came to the harvest were wild grapes: small, flavourless, bitter to the taste, inedible, useless for winemaking. What a disappointment!

What was that bitter harvest, what were those sour, wild grapes?

Isaiah spoke of a nation that did evil instead of good, that was unjust, that oppressed people, that did not care for the orphans and the widows, the most vulnerable in society (Is 1:16f). He spoke critically of the rulers, the leaders: “Your rulers are rebels, associates of thieves; every one of them loves a bribe and chases after gifts; they deny the fatherless their rights, and the widow’s cause is never heard.” (1:23).

For Isaiah, it was the elders and officers of the people “that have ravaged the vineyard; in your houses are the spoils taken from the poor.” And he asks them, “Is it nothing to you that you crush my people and grind the faces of the poor?” (3:14f).

He was very critical of the rich who flaunted themselves, who had every extravagance, every luxury, all that the heart desired; were happy to party and celebrate and drink late into the night (Is 5:11-12), “yet for the work of the Lord they have never a thought, no regard for what he has done.” (Is 5:12b).

He says to them, “You are doomed! Heroes of the wine bottle! Brave and fearless when it comes to mixing drinks! But just for a bribe you

let the guilty go free, and you prevent the innocent from getting justice.” (Is 5:22f – GNB).

That is the bitter fruit, the wild grapes of selfishness and greed and lack of compassion, instead of the choice harvest of justice and care for the weak, the sweet grapes of awareness of the grace and mercy of God, his love and provision for them as a nation.

Isaiah sums it up as rebellion against the glory of God: “Jerusalem is brought low, Judah has come to grief, for in word and deed they defied the Lord, in open rebellion against his glory.” (Is 3:8).

What would happen? God will judge: the hedge will be removed, the wall broken down, the place left derelict. The nation will be attacked by enemies and ultimately destroyed, broken down, left desolate.

It is a sobering picture both of God’s blessing and also of God’s judgement.

To what extent do these pictures ring true for us as the Cathedral, as a nation? What is the fruit of our labour? Our giving? Our faithful citizenship? Our hard work? Do we practice justice? Care for the widows and orphans? To what extent are we governed by selfishness and greed? What would Isaiah have to say about those who flaunt their wealth, who wallow in luxury? We have to ask whether the response of the President to Nkandlagate is correct, where it seems that tax payers money has been used wrongly. We have to ask why the government has chosen to deny the Dalai Lama a visa to attend the Nobel Laureate Peace Summit. We have to ask questions of all who have misused or abused their office. Do we as Christians stand out, separate, different, from this?

The psalm picks up the story, and perhaps it also echoes our cry, our heart-ache, when what we see is a broken-down vineyard, destruction, disappointment, closed doors, desolation. Perhaps it is your cry at this time:

“Why then have you broken down its walls: so that every passer-by can pluck its fruit? ... Turn to us again O Lord of hosts: look down from heaven and see. Bestow your care upon this vine: the stock which your own right hand has planted... Restore us again O Lord of hosts: show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.” (Ps 80:12, 14, 15, 19)

It is to God that we look in hope.

Matt 21:33-46

In our Gospel reading, Jesus uses this same image of the vineyard to represent the people of Israel, the chosen people of God. We hear the familiar picture: the landowner, the vines carefully planted, the wall built to protect them, a winepress to make wine, a watchtower to scare off the birds that might otherwise eat the crop.

But his point is different. It is not that there is no fruit, no harvest. Instead, it is the tenants, those responsible for the harvest, who are shown to be unfaithful. When the servants of the landowner come to ask for the produce, the tenants beat them up. Finally, the landowner sends his son – and the tenants decide to kill him so that the vineyard can become theirs.

The story ends with the comment – “When the chief priests and Pharisees heard his parables, they saw that he was referring to them.” (Matt 21:45) The tenants are the religious leaders of the nation, those who had rejected Jesus as Messiah, and ultimately were responsible for his death. They had been entrusted with God’s “vineyard” but were using their position for their own benefit and were not caring for God’s people.

The landowner represents us when we give our all, as parents, as teachers, as church or community leaders. The time comes when the landowner goes away - we have to step down, or let go of our

position, our authority – and we entrust to others the people or the causes we have served. Things don't always go the way we would like them to go.

The landowner comes back and throws the tenants out, giving the vineyard to someone else. He is angry – this is “righteous anger” that we all feel, when people betray trust, or abuse authority, or cause great suffering.

The tenants in the original context represent the chief priests and Pharisees. They can represent us, to the extent that we lose the sense of being stewards of all we possess. What we have, what we are given, is not ours to own and control. We hold everything in trust – our resources, our finances, the life of the church, our community, the created world around us. The tenants react violently when they are asked to give account, to give what is due – because they ultimately want to own the vineyard and be accountable only to themselves. They want to control it all, own it all, have it all.

Thanksgiving

Last Sunday was our Patronal Festival. It was our annual opportunity to for each of us commit ourselves to support the ministry of the cathedral. It was also our Thanksgiving Sunday, when anyone could come up and give testimony to how God had blessed them, or things for which they were particularly thankful.

A very big thank you to all who are part of the cathedral family, for your generosity and love and support, to all who have pledged and committed to give for the year ahead. Thank you for friendship and love and prayers.

I was struck, as always, by what people said during the time of thanksgiving. There was thanksgiving for work, for employment, for God's provision. But perhaps more than anything else there was thanksgiving and deep gratitude for family or friends, for those around

us; and for the life of the cathedral. It was the little things that stood out, the personal details in people's lives.

To speak personally for a few moments - I know for me how much it has meant to have my mother living here near us, for the past four months – and although she can no longer walk, and can hardly speak, how thankful I am to be able to spend time with her. I am immensely grateful, thankful to God for that, and for the community and staff up at St Luke's who care for her. These are not things that will change the world, but for me and for us as a family, this is a very real blessing, and I thank God for the gift of these past four months.

People spoke last week about how the cathedral community has been for them a place of healing and support and love and prayer; there was real appreciation for the ministry offered and received here; for the worship and the music; there was gratitude for our rainbow community, for just how diverse we are. We embrace, we share the peace, we reach out to one another, we hold hands, we are joined together in community, we kneel together here at the altar to receive the life of Christ. We journey and walk the life of faith, together. In our fragile and divided society, what a gift this is!

So there is much fruit, many wonderful bunches of grapes, a wonderful harvest, much gratitude. A vineyard that is growing, and thriving, and flourishing.

But our readings today also leave us with questions. Questions about our life in Christ: do we live with honesty? Do we care for the poor, those on the margin? How can we help those who are struggling with limited income and the need for a room, a home, a house? Is our life and witness as the cathedral here in Grahamstown helping to build a more compassionate society? Are we a community of forgiveness? Are we able to speak the truth to one another? Or do we hide our pains, our hurt, our real thoughts, behind polite smiles? How genuine are we?

The recent tragedy in Nigeria, with the collapse of the guest house linked to the church led by TB Joshua, leading to the deaths of a number of South Africans, and also the beheadings and other atrocities committed by ISIS (the Islamic State), has led to a great deal of public discussion and questioning. Our hearts go out to the families of all who have died in these tragedies, and our prayers are with all who are suffering. But big questions are being asked about the nature of religion and religious leadership. Last week's Grocotts had as one of its feature pages people's "off the cuff" comments about the role of pastors, the power that some seem to exercise over people. Congregants drinking petrol, eating grass, or subscribing to some very strange beliefs and practices in the name of faith and religion – where do we stand as people of faith? Or when religion is used to justify acts of cruelty and gross abuse of human rights, what is our response?

Events like these warn us that we are on dangerous ground. Religious institutions and religious leadership can be very powerful. They can be distorted and misused. Things can go horribly wrong. It may well be that a person has a healing ministry, or can help people in some way. But the power and adulation that comes with ministry can be very dangerous – the temptation that Jesus experienced in the desert, the temptation to rule the world. And a religion can speak of peace and harmony, but can become a way to exercise extreme control over others. Faith and belief and the spiritual life are part of who we are – the test and challenge for us all is that we bear the good fruit, that we act justly, that we care deeply for one another, that we are good and faithful stewards of what we have been given.

CONCLUSION

What is the fruit of our labour? Let us be people, a community, who see possibilities and dream – that we may bear fruit. To you, Lord, we look in hope, in thanksgiving, and in trust.