



Exegesis of the 1st reading, IS 5:1—7

Up to this point in his book, Isaiah has been calling for a change of heart within the people of Israel. They wandered away from God, and Isaiah urges them to return. In this oracle, Isaiah gives them a vivid picture to impress upon them just how much they disappoint God with their sinful ways. Initially, Isaiah's words appear to be merely the lyrics of a lovely song about a friend and his vineyard. Only at the end of the oracle does the surprising revelation come that the song is really about God and God's chosen people.

1. *Promise.* Isaiah's friend is very attentive to the vineyard. He is careful to provide it with every advantage. This friend chooses the best vines, plants them in the best soil, and protects them from harm. With all this work put into the vineyard, it seems guaranteed that the harvest will be a good one. The friend even has a wine press fully ready to receive the grapes and begin the process of making good wine.
2. *Failure.* It comes as a shock that the crop is a complete failure. The cause cannot be a lack of attention on the vintner's part. The problem must certainly rest deep within the grapes themselves. Frustrated, the friend plans to abandon the project altogether. It is not the grapes that will be trampled down, but the entire vineyard! As Isaiah's audience marvels at this sad outcome, the prophet suddenly reveals that they themselves are the failed vineyard. Despite all God's efforts to teach the people good judgment and true justice, they turn to bloodshed and violence

Exegesis of the 2nd reading, Phil 4:6—9

- 1) *Prayer.* Paul encourages people of faith to never hesitate asking God for strength to live by the standards of the Gospel.
- 2) *Excellence.* Paul further encourages them to fill their minds with noble thoughts, striving for all that is honorable and excellent.

Exegesis of the Gospel, Mt 21:33-43

Today's parable of the vineyard is a reworking by Matthew of a similar story in Mark 12: 1—12. It is an allegory about salvation history that Matthew has sharpened into a controversy regarding why Jesus was killed. The focus of the controversy includes a sharp criticism of Israel's leadership. The dispute is not with all Jews, but rather



with Jewish leadership that has proven to be incompetent and ultimately replaced.

1) *The vineyard Israel.* The parable has assumed the form of an allegory. The vineyard represents Israel, the tenant farmers are Israel's leaders, the householder is God, the servants are the prophets, and the son is Jesus. The story opens with a description of a typical absentee landlord leasing his property to tenants who would care for it while the owner would be gone for long periods of time. When the landowner would return, he expected to collect payment from the tenants for the land. They, in turn, would be able to keep a small percentage of the profits.

2) *Refusal to pay.* A crisis emerges when the tenants decide not to pay the landowner. They kill the servants sent to collect the profits numerous times. For some strange reason, the landowner thinks that if he sends his son, the tenants will respect him. The tenants think that somehow by killing the landowner's son, they will gain his inheritance. The landowner, however, is still alive and so no inheritance would be available even in an honest situation, which this is not. Nevertheless, the tenants throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him. This is all a symbolic story about the killing of Jesus and the incompetent Jewish leaders.

3) *The question is asked.* "What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?" The answer is that he will have them killed and then lease his vineyard to other tenants. He will give it to tenants who will produce its fruits. Some read this as the rejection of the Jews by God and their replacement by the gentiles. That interpretation does not hold up under careful examination. This is really about the rejection of certain Jewish leaders and their replacement with new and competent Jewish leadership. Matthew sees this as an intra-Jewish dispute, and not the replacement of the Jews by the gentiles. Later, that will in fact happen, but not at this time.

HOMILY CONNECTIONS

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: "Human life, as a gift of God, is sacred and inviolable. For this reason procured abortion and euthanasia are absolutely unacceptable, Not only must human life not be taken, but it must be protected with loving concern. ...Respect for life requires that science and technology should always be at the service of the human and their integral development. Society as a whole must respect, defend and promote the dignity of the human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life." *St John Paul II The*



Gospel of Life, no 81

“When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities-to offer just a few examples-it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.” *Pope Francis On Care for Our Common Home no 117*

PURPOSE: To show that Matthew’s reworking of a parable found in Mark highlights the notion of bearing fruit as perhaps the most important aspect of true religion.

SUMMARY: God’s message to humanity can sometimes appear to be ineffective-blocked by any number of mis- guided human responses to the divine initiative. God’s word is effective when it produces true conversion as shown in actions that bear good fruit.

- A) **ATTENTION-GETTER:** Imagine yourself pausing in quiet wonder in a beautiful garden. Now think of the God who created the beautiful world we live in and, painstaking care of that gift by the gardener, stepping back to admire God’s creation and his own contribution to that beauty. Each of us is a masterpiece, created by God with purpose and tenderness, and we are called to provide good care for that wonderful creation. We are each loved so intensely and are each of such great worth that we cannot even comprehend it.
- B) **APPLICATION** Each October is set aside by the bishops of the United States as Respect Life Month, a time to particularly reflect on life issues and to pray for and promote greater respect for all human life. In today’s Gospel, Matthew indicates that the recognition of wonder of God’s creation in our world and in the dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, calls us to true discipleship. True discipleship consists neither in election nor in saying the right things about God. Rather, the crucial factor is having good fruit when the proper time (*kairos*) comes. Those fruits are most evident in our respect and protection of human life from conception to natural death, as well as our care for the world that God created.
- 1) In the Gospel of Matthew, fruit clearly operates as a metaphor representing true conversion, a change that involves actually doing what God wills.



- a) Matthew continues a notion expressed at the end of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, using the word fruit seven times in five verses, asserts that the distinction between true and false discipleship is what one produces by way of good works, not simply in being chosen.
 - b) Nor does discipleship consist in crying out “Lord, Lord” (Mt 7:21). A more apt criterion is offered in the verses right before today’s Gospel where one son answers the father’s request by saying “I’m on my way” but doesn’t go; the other son says “No, I will not go” but proceeds to repent and actually do the father’s will.
 - 2) The parable of the vineyard also makes it clear that being in the right religion is not an adequate fulfillment of God’s will.
 - a) Matthew is addressing two different scandals: the so-called scandal of particularity (i.e. why would God choose and favor one nation—Israel?) and the scandal of the cross (how could Jesus, if he truly were the Messiah, die so ignominiously?).
 - b) The rejection of Jesus by the Jewish authorities may be an example of presumption (i.e. their sense of being chosen, blinded them to the actual presence of the Messiah in their midst).
 - c) By highlighting the history of Israel’s rejection of God’s prophets, Matthew is able to neatly fit the crucifixion of Jesus into this pattern of persecution, linking Jesus to John the Baptist and earlier prophets whose fates were sealed by proclaiming God’s will. That strategy serves to somewhat mitigate the so-called scandal of the cross.
 - d) Each person of faith has to ask: “What are the practical consequences of my belief?” Do I live as a child of God? If one’s faith produces discord, anger, pride, greed, violation of nature (as the vineyard references suggest), persecution, disregard for the dignity of human life or even murder, how does that fulfill the will of the God who created us, redeemed us and sanctifies us?
- C) CONCLUSION: To view Matthew’s reworking of Mark’s parable as simply a polemic against the Jewish leaders is to miss wider implications. First among those is the notion that bearing fruit requires both belief and action. This means repentance, true conversion, and actions that reflect our belief in the Gospel and reflect that conversion. The choices we make and the actions that we take, like active work to



respect and protect human life and the care of God's creation which provides a home for God's children, bear fruit in building the Kingdom of God .

D) TRANSITION TO LITURGY OF EUCHARIST: Having opened ourselves to the Scriptures, we now prepare to receive the bread of life and the cup of our salvation so as to be strengthened to go out and bear good fruit.