

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Respect Life)

Our Gospel today from the 21st chapter of Matthew gives us one of Jesus truly great parables; a parable that is rooted in a much earlier image from the prophet Isaiah in our first reading.

It has to do with a vineyard planted by a landowner. It is a straightforward allegorical story where every character and element of the story corresponds directly to something in the spiritual order. So as we unpack the meaning of the allegory, we unpack its spiritual meaning and power as well.

So Jesus says to the chief priests and elders of the people—the religious establishment of His time: Hear another parable—*there was a landowner who planted a vineyard*— harkening back to Isaiah we know that this has to do with God, who plants the vineyard of Israel. He forms a people after his own heart, after his own mind. He forms a people that would think like Him and act like Him and love like Him. And they in turn by the very attractiveness of their life would draw the nations of the world. It is a vineyard because it is meant to be fruitful. It is an image of life and growth and thriving.

So a landowner planted a vineyard, he put a hedge around it. He is protecting it from wild animals. This is God the Father protecting Israel with all of its laws, the stipulations of its covenants, etc. Think of the walls of Jerusalem, keeping out those powers that would threaten it. We hear too that he built a tower in it; a place of protection, of oversight—it is God watching over the vineyard of Israel for He is the author and protector of the life He has planted there.

As the allegory goes on to say: then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. So very important it is that God gives Israel this tremendous privilege of presiding over the vineyard. In this we see God giving us a participation in the governance of the world and the protection of life. But, it is important to note that we are **not** owners, we are **tenants**. We do not own the world. We do not own Israel. We do not own the church. We do not even own our own lives for that matter. Rather, these things are leased out to us. We are here to watch over them, tend them, keep guard over them but we do not own them. All of it is gift.

We are not owners, we are tenants. It is secularism that gives rise to this illusion of ownership and control over the universe, over nature, and over our own bodies and lives. Life, our very existence, is a gift from God.

So when vintage time drew near, he, the owner, sent his servants to the tenants to harvest his produce. Israel is meant to be productive. It is meant to give rise to right praise and right action. It is meant to produce the heady wine of a good life. So **Yahweh** sends His servants—

the prophets and the patriarchs—His great representatives. Their job is to obtain this produce for God.

But, the tenants seize the servants, one they beat, another they killed, a third they stoned. This is the sad history of Israel in relation to its prophets. The very people that God sends to gather in the harvest of Israel are stoned and beaten and killed. Israel all too often, over the course of its history, rejects those who God sends. And so it goes for us, **Yahweh** sends representatives to us all the time. How do we treat them? Do we savor them and listen closely to their words and abide by them and produce what we are meant to produce as a people of God? Or do we send them away mocking them and belittling them?

Again he sent more servants, more numerous than the first. But they treated them in the same way. More prophets, more teachers, more spokespersons—but Israel rejects them as well. Then the story comes to its climax: finally he sent his son to them, thinking they will respect his son. Here comes someone who not only represents the landowner's interests, not just a mere spokesperson, but now comes the one who represents his very being. He sent his son. This is Christ, of course. Jesus is referring to himself in this parable. He comes at the end of the long prophetic history of Israel, but he is greater than all of them. He is the Son. *Surely, they will respect him, the landowner thinks to himself.*

And then this devastating detail, they seized him threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. This is very poignant because when Jesus was killed He was dragged out of the vineyard. Think of Jerusalem built on the hill, the tower of the temple, this was the vineyard. Jesus was dragged out of that vineyard, they nailed him to a cross, and they killed him. The whole drama of sin found right here. The son of God comes and our instinct is not to embrace him, to listen to him, to bask in his light; our instinct rather is to eliminate him. If we eliminate God, then we can get the vineyard. The voice of contemporary secularism saying, if we can eliminate God we can take possession of nature, of the world, of our own bodies, our own lives. That is the fantasy of secularism. It comes from killing of the Son of God. But what is the Christian Story? The one they killed did not stay in his grave but came back to life and claimed lordship over the vineyard and over life itself. He claimed lordship over Israel, and over the new Israel which is the Church. The risen Christ overcomes our attempt to kill him. The risen Christ remains the lord of the vineyard and the lord of life itself. We must take care of this vineyard of life so that it produces what it is supposed to—never aspiring to ownership. When we do that then we honor Jesus properly as the lord of the vineyard and the lord of all life from natural conception to natural death.

And this is why we celebrate this ***Respect Life Sunday*** each year. It's to save our lives from the wretched eternal death referred to in Matthew's gospel; and to save the lives of the most vulnerable among us. Let us proclaim that life, pledge to preserve it, and devote ourselves to its protection.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella