



Your Vineyard

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By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Jesus often conveyed His teaching through the means of parables. Normally, a parable has one point to make, and the details leading up to it are not important. But that is not the case with the parable in today's Gospel (Matthew 21:33-43), the parable of the vineyard. This is not so much a parable, as it is an allegory in which all the details have an important significance.

The vineyard stands for the people of Israel, as Isaiah points out in the first reading (Isaiah 5:1-7). The owner is God. The tenant farmers stand for the chief priests and Pharisees whom

God put in charge of his people. The first group of servants whom the owner sends to get his share of the grapes represents the early prophets whom God sent to Israel. The servants of the second group are the later prophets. The owner's son, killed by the tenant farmers, is Jesus. The new tenant farmers to whom the owner leases his vineyard are the Apostles of Jesus. They replace the chief priests and Pharisees as the new leaders of God's people. The first leasing of the vineyard refers to the old covenant. The second leasing refers to the new covenant.

The story outlines very clearly the repeated breaking of the covenant by God's chosen people. But it also reveals the nature of God Himself. It tells us God's trust in man. The owner of the vineyard entrusted it to the tenants. He did not stand over them to exercise a police-like supervision. He went away and left them with their task. God pays man the compliment of entrusting them with His work. Every task we receive is our part of the vineyard given to us to do by God.

The story tells us of God's patience. The Master sent messenger after messenger. He did not come with sudden vengeance when one messenger had been abused, another killed and another stoned. He gave the cultivators chance after chance to respond to his appeal. God bears with us in all our sinning, and will not cast us off.

It tells us of God's judgment. In the end the master of the vineyard took the vineyard from the cultivators and gave it to others. God's sternest judgment is when He takes out of our hands the task He entrusted us to do. A man has sunk to his lowest level when he has become useless to God.

The allegory of the vineyard also tells us much about ourselves. God gives each of us a vineyard, and He takes the initiative in helping us to bring that task to completion. We saw in the first reading from Isaiah that He levels the field, removes the stones,

plants the grapes, waters and tends the vines. He erects the walls and briars that protect the vineyard from marauders and erects the watchtower. Likewise He equips us with everything, talent, time and our human relationships that are our resources in cultivating that particular vineyard that is ours.

In the story, the master left the cultivators to do the task as they liked. God is not tyrannical taskmaster. He gives us the freedom to respond to Him as we wish. He is like a wise director who allocates a task and trusts that person to do it.

But as was the case for the tenants, we too, can abuse that freedom. The tenants carry out a deliberate policy of rebellion and disobedience towards the master. By our sins, we fail to tend to our vineyard and thus frustrate a plan that God had intended from all eternity.

At the end of the story, the tenants have to account to their master for their misuse of their freedom and their abuse of the vineyard. We too will be answerable to God for the vineyard He entrusted to us.

Today's Gospel prompts us to reflect on our vineyard, to name it and to acknowledge its boundaries. It prompts us to recognize the many talents, resources and the human relationships He has entrusted to us as His steward to make that vineyard produce abundant fruit. Most of all, He gives us Himself in the Eucharist as our constant help and presence as we work in His vineyard.

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