

## **October 4, 2020**

IS 5:1-7; PHIL 4:6-9; MT 21:33-43

We are very concerned about knowing what is ours. We have fences to mark our property, we label things to be sure people know who it belongs to - we hold on to these things for a sense of comfort. Imagine the feeling of the people who have all their things lost in a natural disaster (like the fires in California), or who are robbed. But what is easier to forget is that only God is the true owner of all things, and we are in an agreement with that God that involves how we use these things. But starting with Adam and Eve, humans want to have it all.

In the parable in the Gospel, Jesus is speaking about God's relationship to his people - it is both a historical commentary and a prediction of the future. Jesus uses the image of the landowner and tenants to show the care of God, and also to show the duties of humans in their relationship with God. The landowner leases his land out to tenant farmers. This was a common arrangement of that day. In exchange for the use of his land, the owner would receive a portion of the produce as rent. From all the things that his land produced there was enough for the tenant and his family, and also some to be given to the landowner. Yet, the landowner did not just keep it all for himself either. He fed his family, took care of those who were dependent on him, and also would have had to provide food for the tenants between planting and harvest. The produce given to the landlord served many purposes, and even the tenants would have depended on the landowner's storehouse before the crops came in. It is an agreement that benefits all.

We heard in the Gospel: *There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey.* The landowner had built the vineyard and provided tenants with all they needed (including mature vines that were already producing fruit), but they are not grateful for this, or for his hiring them. Although they have no legal right to the things of the landowner, and although they are dependent on what they give him for next years food, they decide they will break their agreement and keep it all for themselves. They kill the messages sent to remind them of the promise they made - and in a final act of treachery they kill the landowner's son. In the law of the time, if a landowner died without an heir, the land goes to the tenants - this was their plan. They will do anything, including killing to take it all for themselves. They are willing, in their greed, to abandon the contract they made with the landowner.

The prophet in the first reading uses similar imagery: *My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower, and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes.* God is that friend who has provided this world for us, and who places us as tenants on that land. God has the right, like the landowner to expect what he is due from his land. But instead of sharing that time, talent, and treasure, people typically want to keep it all for themselves. The servants that the landowner sent to the vineyard represent the prophets who reminded the people (and still remind us today) of our relationship and responsibilities to God and our neighbors. The son sent by the landowner represents Jesus. The leaders of that time killed him so they could stay in charge, and in our times, people push Jesus out of their lives - kill him in their hearts - so that they can stay in charge. But all of that is doomed to failure.

In the first reading we hear that as a result of the retreat of the builder, the vineyard is withered and destroyed. In the Gospel result of the death of the heir of the landowner is not that the wicked tenants get to keep it all - he simply evicts the wicked tenants and gives the vineyard to others who will give him his due. He only lets those who fulfill their end of the contract to remain on the land and inherit it. In the same way, we have been placed as tenants in that vineyard, and through the death of Jesus, the only son, we can become heirs too. Rather than focusing on what we get out of it - rather than being like kids who can't wait for their parent to die to get their stuff - we should be like those who fulfill their responsibilities faithfully and trust that good things will come to those who are faithful. St. Paul, in the second reading advises not to focus not on a prize for ourselves, but on the goodness of the present. He says: *... brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious ... anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

A life of greed, self-focus, abandoning our duties to God, and the killing the presence of Jesus in our hearts - this leads to the bad end that came to the wicked tenants. Working in God's vineyard, gathering the fruit, giving in our portion to be shared with others, remaining in love and fidelity to the great God who provided all things for us - this leads to a life of peace. It brings us closer to God and our neighbor, and it is the route to that great inheritance that Our Father wishes to give to all those who are faithful tenants in his vineyard.