

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 5.1-7

¹ Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. ² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. ³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. ⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting: he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

SECOND READING: Philippians 3.4b-14

⁴ If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as

First Reading: This is a very obvious passage to read in support of the Gospel today, which is the parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21. This Isaiah passage, too, is a parable, and a rare example of the form, so far as the Scriptures (our Old Testament) are concerned. Like all parables it speaks for itself, provided that the hearer can accept the words. Otherwise it remains obscure! Isaiah, working in the eighth century BC, is quite clear that the people have failed their God. Their religious and social way of life has not reflected the special relationship into which they had been called by God, and it does not, therefore, draw others into that relationship, as God intended (Genesis 12.3, 22.18). They were not bearing the right fruit, and that means, for Isaiah, that they are ripe for judgement!

Epistle: Paul is explaining, in this passage from Philippians, that 'righteousness comes not from the law but through faith', an argument he also develops in Romans (Romans 5). If righteousness came through works, then he, Paul, would have every reason to be confident, 'according to the flesh'.

Epistle notes contd.

But that is not to be his 'way', and he stresses that all that matters is to 'gain Christ and be found in him'. He is content, not to work hard for blessing, as it were, but to share in the suffering of Christ, that he may share also in his resurrection. So, forgetting what lies behind, his blamelessness under the law and his qualification to be among 'the elect', he strains forward in the service of God. It sounds as though there should be some good fruit on the vine, as a result!

Epistle continued: rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, 9 not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: Matthew 21.33-46

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: 33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.' 42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?' 43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.' 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Gospel notes:

It looks very much as though Jesus has picked up the parable of Isaiah, here, and applied it to the new situation, brought about by his ministry. The Gospels certainly reflect a situation in which the teaching of Jesus is rejected by many. So, like the prophets before him, Jesus 'looks for justice but sees bloodshed; righteousness but hears a cry' (Is.5.7). Of course this parable goes beyond Isaiah's, for it focuses on the tenants of the vineyard. God has sent his prophets in an effort to encourage a harvest from them, and even, in the end, sent his Son, but they have not 'come up with the goods'! So, the wayward vineyard will not be laid desolate, which, as in Isaiah, is a common image of judgement, but it will be given to other tenants. If that means us then we had better be producing the fruit! The second half of the passage changes the image a bit, seeing Jesus as the cornerstone, which is crucial to the stability of the building but can also crush the life out of 'anyone on whom it falls'. There is plenty in today's readings to think about!

Post-Communion Collect:

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.