

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 5, 2008

Is. 5:1-7; Ps. 80:9-20; Phil. 4:6-9; Matt. 21:33-43

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While "surfing the net" one day, to my surprise and delight I came across replicas, in full, vivid color, of five 16th century paintings of the Madonna and Child. In each, either Mary is feeding Jesus grapes or there are grapes very evident elsewhere in the painting. My favorite is the one of an impish Jesus peeking out from under his mother's veil, hoping no one will see him take a handful of grapes from the cluster Mary is holding. There is even one painting with the two sitting on a bench under a very fertile grapevine.

No wonder, then, that one of Jesus' favorite parable motifs is a vineyard. In John 15, he even calls himself the vine and us the branches needing to stay closely attached to him if we are to be fruitful.

The last three Sundays the Church has presented Jesus' vineyard parables from the Gospel of Matthew. Today, we have that of the "wicked tenants" who rid themselves of every possible interference with their devious plan to take over the landowner's vineyard. Sadly, it seems, the landowner has no choice but to give over the vineyard to others who will tend it properly so that it will produce abundant fruit.

In today's first reading, Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," it is the vineyard itself that dashes all hope that it will bear good fruit in spite of the tender loving care the owner has lavished on it. The owner, then, is forced to allow his beloved vineyard to go to ruin.

Psalm 80 that follows has the psalmist asking why such a drastic response, and begging for restoration of the vineyard. Finally, he admits that the vineyard itself is responsible for its own destruction: "...we will no more withdraw from you..." So, now we know: we do not see in either reading a destructive, punishing God. Rather, this is a God who did not stand in the way of his people's choice to be unfaithful and so be the cause of their own downfall.

I, too, have been entrusted with a vineyard in which I am called to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with my God; in which I am to love my God with all my heart, soul, mind, strength and to love my neighbor as myself. How apropos, then, is our Dominican motto, "to contemplate and to give to others the fruit of our contemplation"! Do I extend lovingly the fruit of compassion, care and concern, flowing from a contemplative spirit, to every person who walks into my vineyard, whether that vineyard be my home, my workplace, the marketplace; whether that person be a stranger, a friend, a fellow sojourner, or even an enemy?

Does the fruit that I produce bear any resemblance to the "good fruit" symbolized by the plump, juicy, delicious red and green grapes that I see Jesus enjoying in those 16th century paintings?