**Homily for the Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**October 4, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7 (The vineyard that produces no fruit.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 80 (The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel.)*

*Second Reading: Philippians 4:6-9 (Think about the things that are worthy of praise.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43 (The parable of the tenant farmers.)*

This is the third week in a row that a vineyard has featured prominently in the gospel. Yet, each week the vineyard has meant something different. Two weeks ago, the vineyard was the world in which we live, as opposed to the heavenly realm, where God dwells. The laborers sent into the vineyard represented all of us who are called to work in the world to build the Kingdom of God, with the hope of receiving the wages of eternal life. Last week, the vineyard was just a vineyard, with no symbolic meaning at all. It was merely the setting for Jesus’ parable about repentance and conversion. This week, in the first reading, the psalm *and* the gospel, the vineyard represents the people of Israel. Jesus borrows this traditional image from the Old Testament, but then puts his own spin on it by introducing the characters of the tenant farmers.

Isaiah’s prophecy emphasizes all the hard work that the landowner (God) has put into the vineyard (Israel) to make it productive, and his disappointment and frustration at how poorly the vineyard has responded to all of that care and attention that it has received. Eventually, the landowner gives up on the vineyard and allows it to be ravaged by natural forces. This is a symbolic way of expressing a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament. Time and time again, the prophets exhort the Jewish people to remember all the wonders that God has done for them and to remain faithful to the covenant, lest God withdraw his protection and allow their enemies to destroy them. Isaiah’s image of the carefully tended vineyard being trampled by grazing animals and overgrown with thorns and briers served as both a commentary on the recent fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and a warning about the imminent threat to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He’s saying, “This is what has happened to your brothers and sisters to the North, and it can happen to you, if you don’t change your ways.” The Psalmist pleads desperately for the Lord to save the vineyard that he has taken from Egypt and transplanted so lovingly in the land of Canaan. But, Isaiah puts the blame squarely on the Jewish people. He reminds them that their misery is a direct result of their infidelity, not God’s negligence. God has done everything he could possibly do for them, and all he gets in return is bloodshed and injustice.

In the gospel, Jesus uses that familiar image of the vineyard for an entirely different purpose. The vineyard again represents the people of Israel, but now the focus shifts to those whom the landowner has put in charge of *tending* the vineyard, namely, the religious leaders. Unlike Isaiah and the other prophets, Jesus finds no fault with the people and their fidelity to the covenant. He suggests that they’re doing the best they can, under the circumstances. After all, they are no longer a free people. They’re living under Roman occupation now. What seems to be holding them back, making their lives less fruitful than they could be, is the poor leadership from their chief priests and elders. These leaders are supposed to be guiding the people toward greater holiness and showing them a good example of selfless service. But, instead of doing all for the glory of God, they want all the honors and respect for themselves. To put it in terms of the parable, the chief priests and elders seem to be forgetting that they are merely tenant farmers, working for the owner of the vineyard. The produce of the vineyard – all the good works that the people do, and all the blessings which result from their efforts – should give glory to the landowner. Instead, those efforts are being diverted away from their main purpose in order to line the pockets of their religious leaders and to make them feel important and powerful.

There is a pretty obvious warning here for the leaders of our modern Church, and for all the people of the Church, as well. For centuries, the Church so closely identified its mission with the work of the clergy that lay people felt completely excluded and irrelevant. Their good works didn’t seem to count for anything, unless they were serving under the direct supervision of a cleric. Then, their service was considered part of the *clergy’s* mission, which gave it value. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has taken a very different view, teaching that *all* members of the Church participate directly in the one mission of Christ. Though each person contributes in his our own distinct way, all of our efforts are directed toward the same goals – the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

The people of the Church also need to watch out for another danger, which is related to clericalism, but not limited to those in the clerical state. It’s a subtle idolatry that can creep into the Church, misdirecting the glory away from God and toward God’s servants instead. Anyone who serves the Lord in any capacity can be lured into this trap, regardless of whether or not they hold an official title or serve in a recognized ministry. Whenever we receive praise for the good that we do in the Lord’s name, we should graciously thank the person who complimented us, but also silently give thanks in our hearts to the Lord who called us and empowered us to serve his people. It is a privilege to be able to give witness to our faith by our good works. Hence, there is never any cause for boasting. Besides, when we serve others, we always seem to benefit as much as they do. So, it is only fitting to give all the glory to God, and to reserve none of it for ourselves.

The truth of the matter is that all of us are tenant farmers in the Lord’s vineyard. All of us have a job to do, and all that we produce should be for the glory of God, not for ourselves. So, let us work hard, work responsibly, and work together. And, may God be glorified by all that we accomplish in his name.