

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2nd October 2011 Year A

1. Today's parable (Matthew 21.33-46) is anything but a lovely rural story. It had such an effect on the Pharisees that it added to their determination to crush Jesus. Was it just a parable for the religious authorities who were questioning Jesus' authority or does it challenge us today?

2. Jesus' audience would have been familiar with this story from a similar one in Isaiah and its message that God might justly feel exasperated and disappointed with his people. They knew that Jesus' parable would be a reproof too, but it takes on new dimensions. They would recognize the prophets as the slaves in the story; but when he goes on to speak of the son sent by the father, Jesus is telling them who he is. Jesus tells the story in such a way that the listeners actually pronounce judgment on themselves (v. 41) and Jesus' final pronouncement in v. 43-44 gives no doubt about the withdrawal of God's favour from his ancient people.

3. Paul grappled with these ideas (Phil.3. 4b-14). Like other Pharisees he was proud of his heritage but was prepared to put it all aside to receive the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ, to become more Christ-like in his sufferings so that eventually he will experience the power of resurrection too.

4. How do we hear this parable today when at the time it was pointedly addressed to the Pharisees? We often make assumptions about ourselves and even delude ourselves about our relationship with God. To some extent in the church we can see ourselves as the vineyard of the Lord and can be blind to the kind of crop we are producing. We can see ourselves as favoured people and don't necessarily see the responsibility we have to recognize Jesus as the Son sent by God and day-by-day choose to follow him and listen to his truths rather than our own self-deceptions.

5. What kind of harvest will Jesus find in us? Like Paul, may we press on towards the goal of being mature

Christians, so united in Christ that our actions are Christ-like and bear good fruit.

Dining, feasting, banqueting are universal ways of celebration. Recall some magnificent feasts you have attended or meals or parties you have arranged to celebrate particular events. Like us, the Hebrews held feasts on birthdays, marriages, funerals, laying of foundations, vintage and shearing.

It is no wonder that the images of God's rejoicing with his beloved also are images of feasting. Some of the poetry of the Old Testament describes a rich feast, the cessation of tears, and the recognition of God's salvation for all people and the praise of those who have been rescued from all manner of life-destroying situations.

This familiar image is also used by Jesus in the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22.1-14) It is a very pointed criticism of the Pharisees who have refused to respond to his invitation. The salvation God offers can best be pictured as a wedding feast and you can imagine the laden tables, the rich food, the plentiful wine. It all signifies the enormous bounty of God, the wealth of satisfaction he offers, the abundance of good things, the joyous feelings, the mood of celebration., the welcome to people even off the street. The host provided robes for the guests who wore them as a token of his regard.

4. God's invitation is abundant, generous, and offered to all; the riches of God's salvation are there waiting for our reception. Yet there are those who refuse. Our communities are feasting communities. We hear the words of invitation to the table it is also the invitation to feast in God's Kingdom. When we gather around the table for the Lord's Supper we receive abundantly from God's blessings.

When we gather in fellowship around a shared meal we also give thanks for the abundance of God's gifts to us. May those festive occasions be symbols of the kinds of communities we are:
generous, open, invitational, welcoming, offering satisfaction and plenty to all.

1. The Letters to the Thessalonian Church are probably the earliest surviving letters written by Paul, probably written about AD 51-2. Thessalonica was and still is the most important city in Macedonia. In Paul's day it was a Roman city, a port, and on a major trade route. It still is an important port for Greece and the southern Balkan area.
2. From Athens, Paul had sent Timothy to check on the church in Thessalonica and to encourage the Christians there. Timothy brought a report concerning the problems of the church, and Paul addressed these in his first letter. Some of his Jewish enemies had attacked his character, putting him under obligation to defend himself. A few of the converts were still behaving as they had as pagans and were morally lax. Some of their congregation had died and there was concern about their status when Christ returned—an event they expected soon. Indeed some had stopped working in anticipation of it. Paul wrote to correct their errors, calm their fears, and encourage them in their Christian life together.
3. In this ecumenical world, there are many denominations and many different types of church structure. Some churches are just single congregations, responsible to non-one except themselves (and they would say, God). We often see extreme examples of these on TV when the teaching and behaviour has got out of hand. The Anglican Church, on the other hand, has a definite structure in which errors are corrected, fears calmed and encouragement given.
4. In each diocese the Bishop has the prime role of maintaining the faith and preventing error and he/she is also the chief encourager. P.802 in A Prayer Book for Australia in the Ordination of a Bishop lists the work of a bishop: maintain the Church's witness..., guard its faith, unity and discipline..., faithful proclamation of the word, and administration of the sacraments, lead and guide the clergy, watch over and protect the people of God, and be a good example to the people he/she serves
5. Paul was not a bishop but an apostle, but he is a great example to those who give oversight in a diocese. We know as Christians that we need encouragement all the time to keep our faith, to grow as Christians, to serve others and to reach out to those who are not yet believers. Occasionally we might need correction and we should accept that in good faith so that we may better serve our Lord. We give thanks for our bishop, and our clergy who lead and guide and encourage us, and give us good examples so that we might encourage each other.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 23rd October Year A

1. The Pharisees came to examine Jesus to see if his teachings were sound. (Matthew 22.34-46) They were a little more open to him since his answer to the resurrection question had silenced the Sadducees (last week's gospel). There were other matters in dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees so Jesus was posed one of them, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

His answer would have pleased them. Jesus took them to the heart of the Law, "Thou shalt love the Lord your God..." The Pharisees knew this prime law but it had become obscured by the hundreds of laws which had aggregated around the basic commandments. Jesus' answer was received without dispute because of the strength of his answer. It is the core of our faith.

He countered with a question to them about the Messiah. Jesus' words established the Messiah as being greater than the Son of David. Who then is Jesus? Is he the Messiah and is the Messiah greater than they had thought? The Pharisees are required to answer in their hearts that same question that is asked again and again in Jesus' Life: Who do you say that I am?

4. Who do you say Jesus is? Today we need to answer this question too. Who is Jesus for you? What is your experience of Jesus? Do you know him as friend, teacher, forgiver of sins, encourager, calmer of storms, challenger of false ideas, saviour? What is your experience? Do you know him just as the historical Jesus of the Bible or in a more intimate way?

We are the Body of Christ. If we are to be Christ's body, in the world teaching, befriending, forgiving, saving, then we need to be able to answer those questions and tell of his truth in our lives and imitate him in loving God and our neighbours as ourselves.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 16th October Year A

Like reporters throwing questions at a public figure, various groups did the same to Jesus, perhaps to know where he stood on issues, perhaps to 'catch him out'. His answers directed them to a new understanding of the Kingdom of God. (Matt. 22.15-33)

Jesus' opponents were trying to trap him with his answer about commitment. Jesus, aware of their intentions, gave a cunning reply, pointing out that these two demands were not at odds. People have obligations to their state and to God. It is not just about taxes and money. Rather it is about citizenship, both to their country and to God's kingdom.

Paul (Thess 1.1-10) gives thanks to God for the commitment of the Christians in Thessalonica, for their response to the Gospel shown by the Holy Spirit at work among them. They have endured as a community and in faith despite persecution. They are transformed, changing from pagan idolaters into servants of the true and living God, waiting expectantly for Christ's return. In this letter, we capture a picture of what it is to be a citizen of the Kingdom.

Imagine what Paul might write to our Church. What would he thank God for in our community? How does the Holy Spirit's power manifest itself in the Church? Are we joyful examples to the other churches round about? Is our faith known in the wider community? How do we show that we are servants of the living God, waiting expectantly for Christ's return? The preacher may give examples of a small community's involvement in mission in the power of the Spirit.

We too are Citizens of the Kingdom of God and so we will have commitments: to work in faith in the conviction of the Spirit as examples to other believers, to be imitators of Christ, to speak of our Lord, and so serve the true and living God.