

I often have reason to drive through the Niagara Region where there are a great number of vineyards. To see these vineyards with row after row of carefully tailored vines always brings to mind images of the biblical vineyards we often hear about in scripture.

Vines are sturdy plants. While they are usually found in mild to warm climates, they can also thrive in less clement regions. They can grow wild and yield grapes of the same nature, or they can be cultivated and thereby produce fruit that is more abundant and sweeter to the taste. The fruit of the cultivated vine both nourishes and delights. From it we get grapes that can be eaten, dried as raisins, or crushed into wine.



In the time of Jesus and in the time of Isaiah, one of the most common sights in the countryside would be a vineyard. It is no wonder both ancient Israel and the early Christians employed the metaphor of a vineyard when speaking of the reign of God. In our readings today Isaiah, David and Jesus all use the image of the vineyard as a way to let the chosen Jewish people know and understand just what has happened to them and will happen to them. Because they were very familiar with the workings of a vineyard, the story made very good sense to them and they could understand the warning inherent in each story.

The response to the psalm today certainly simplifies things if anyone had not already understood the message: “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel”. What David, the attributed author of the psalm, is doing in the psalm is simply letting the Hebrews meditate on how well they have been prepared, planted, and nurtured. It is a prayer for this nurturing to continue so that they might produce fruit, since they have come on to difficult times. The wall of this vineyard has broken down and animals eat the fruit as well as those who pass by steal it. It is a plea to God to continue his good work with Israel.

The metaphor describes a cultivated vineyard that must be tended and protected. In order that its life force be put to the best possible advantage, it needs to be watered and pruned and protected from whatever might hamper its growth. What is also necessary is protection from predators and from those who might rob the owner of its produce. The metaphor suggests that while the vines themselves might be hardy, they are also vulnerable. So is the reign of God. It must be tended and protected from what might endanger it so that it can produce abundant and delectable fruit.

Isaiah tells us that the owner of the vineyard did everything possible to see to it that the grapes were the best from which to make the wine. So Isaiah asks, "What more was there to be done for my vineyard that I have not done in it?" In his frustration with the wild grapes, the owner of the vineyard decided that he would either have to start over again, abandon the land, or lay it to waste. He decides to tear down the protecting hedges, leave it to be overcome with weeds, trample it down and not allow it to be watered so that it becomes a wasteland.

This should have been very frightening to the Hebrews, and indeed it was exactly what happened to them, because they had become the sour grapes, God stopped protecting them, abandoning them to enemies and weather, and soon the Hebrews were conquered and became captives to their enemies.

But God always keeps his promises, and though we don't read it here, we do find out that God remains faithful to the Hebrew people and eventually they are released from their bondage and start again. God keeps his covenant even though the people did not!

We do not slip out of the reign of God by accident. We deliberately step out of it. Just as we freely choose it; so we freely reject it. The first reading and the gospel describe two attempts at thwarting God's plans for the kingdom. In both instances there is deliberate betrayal. The first reading describes the tender and solicitous care God has taken on behalf of the vineyard, his kingdom. God worked tirelessly to ensure that it would thrive and be a source of enjoyment and prosperity. Despite all God's plans and effort it produced an unacceptable crop. There was no mistake here. God was in no way remiss in planting or tending. The vineyard was rebellious.

The metaphor functions differently in the gospel account. Here the fault is not with the vineyard. It produces an abundant crop. In fact, it is the very productivity of the vineyard that sets the stage for the betrayal described here. In this case, those who were trusted stewards turn out to be traitors who wish to take over ownership of the vineyard. They want the vineyard for themselves, and they are willing to use any means to acquire it.

Perhaps at times we can see ourselves in each instance. There are times when, regardless of what God seems to be doing for us, we simply rebel against God's plans. We stand in defiance and cry out: "I will do what I want." There are other times when we who are disciples of Jesus act as if the kingdom is ours, to direct or to manage it as we see fit. We might even marginalise or force out others with whom we do not agree, so that we have sole control.

When we consider the justice of God, it is important we place it within the right context, lest we create a picture of God that is false and misleading. It is because of God's tender love for the vineyard that treachery cannot be tolerated. If we have produced unacceptable fruits, it is for our own good that God steps in and dismantles the structures that enabled us to produce as we did.

If we attempt to overturn the kingdom in order to exercise our own control over it, it is appropriate that God snatch it from our grasp and entrust it to one who will faithfully carry out God's plans.

Today we are provided with an exhortation to righteousness and a psalm that speaks of repentance. Paul's words, though challenging, are nonetheless consoling. He promises that if we

live lives of integrity the God of peace will dwell within us. The psalm describes a new situation after a time of infidelity. Once again God will care for the vine, and it will rejoice in its new life. As terrifying as God's judgment may appear to be, there is always the hope of another chance.

The vine dresser always prunes the vines that they will bear abundant fruit. We must allow the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin and draw us to conversion of heart that we may bear much fruit, fruit that will last forever.