Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

October 2, 2011

I want first to focus on the reading from Isaiah. It’s a parable. What’s a parable? It’s a story: a fictitious story, not real, made up, imagined, to bring out a spiritual truth. This parable in Isaiah is a masterpiece. A masterpiece of literature. A masterpiece of morality. A masterpiece about love – love poured out but not returned. You heard the story. I don’t need to repeat it.

What is the lesson, the truth, the reality within the parable? Start with the vineyard’s owner. Who is he? Yahweh, God, the Lord. What is the vineyard? The house of Israel, the people of Judah. What was so special about the field? Israel was a people of God’s own planting, God’s special choosing, God’s special care. It’s our Walla Walla. God had lavished love upon it. What did the Lord have a right to expect from His people? Justice – the rights of the poor defended. What did Israel actually bring forth? Social crimes, violence, bloodshed. What did God’s people actually produce? An outcry, the cries of the exploited poor.

Where did God’s people place their trust? Not in God. In things other than God: foreign powers, earthly wealth, military might, idols. How did God react? A frightening sentence, in the very human language of the prophets: “Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and God stretched out his hand against them and struck them. Their corpses were like refuse in the streets.” It is the strong language of the Old Testament prophets. God left them where they wanted to be left. The result? Disaster.

Jesus too has a parable about a vineyard. In Jesus’ parable the vineyard is somewhat different from the vineyard in Isaiah. In Jesus’ parable *we* are the Lord’s vineyard – but not the whole vineyard. Remember Jesus’ words the night before he died for us: “I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch, cut off and withered, which they collect and throw into the fire to be burned.” The point is, “the branch gets its life from the vine, that is, the disciples gets his or her life from Jesus.” You and I are alive in Christ only if we are in Christ and he is in us. His life began in us at baptism. But this body, like our physical body, has to grow. But to grow it has to be nourished.

How is this body of Christians nourished? Nourished wondrously by the very flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. What we call “Communion.” Communion: union with – with Jesus and with one another. Right now there is brokenness in the body of Christ. Do you know how many Catholics in this country celebrate the Eucharist, receive Christ in Communion, at least two Sundays a month? Thirty percent. Three out of every ten Catholics. My hope for Christ Our Hope Church? One hundred percent of parishioners feeding each week on the flesh and blood of Christ.

This is the food that changes us into Christ, deepens and expands our likeness to Christ. This is the bread that makes us alive in Christ, makes it possible for us to believe what we cannot see, hope for what is still not ours, love one another as Jesus has loved us. Here, in the Eucharist, you and I live off the vine, off Jesus, more richly than anywhere else.

Our evangelization efforts at Christ Our Hope Church, an effort we dare not disregard, is the desire to get inactive Catholics back to church, inviting them to receive the body and blood of Christ. Isn’t it hard to believe? We have to beg our sisters and brothers to receive the bread that gives us life – God’s life now, God’s life for ever. “If you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” This is not some off-the-wall idea of mine. This is Jesus talking!

But that’s not enough. It’s not enough to receive – even to receive Eucharist. With Jesus within us, we should be on fire to give. Not just money in the collection, although that’s very important. Time. Talent. Like Jesus, to give ourselves. There are innumerable ways in which we can give ourselves. But all of us are called to give of ourselves as God gives us to give.

The more active among us cannot leave work for justice and peace to the outreach committee. Put your imagination to work. Imagine that next Sunday you came to Christ Our Hope for Mass. You are met at the church doors by the liturgy committee. Chuck Middendorf announces to you, “You don’t’ have to attend Mass this morning. We did it for you”. Absurd, of course. But many of us leave ministry to committees – not only outreach, but liturgy, RCIA, communications, hospitality, whatever. No committee can do our “Catholic thing” for us.

Yes, I’m preparing for Stewardship month in November. Yes, I’m reflecting on yesterday’s first parish leadership retreat. And no. I don’t come to you with an instant solution. There is no such thing. I simply submit that at the beginning of our second year of ministry here at Christ Our hope we are presented with an awesome opportunity. To worship with excellence. To be wonderfully open to all that is human, hands and arms outstretched to the lonely and the unloved, to the outcast and the despised, to persons on the downtown streets who are among the most vulnerable. This is to love as Jesus loved.

Dear friends and parishioners, our vineyard, Christ’s vineyard, is growing right here in downtown Seattle. Whether it will yield a harvest worthy of Christ or the rotten grapes of Isaiah’s vineyard will depend in large measure on each of us, the depth of our faith and love, on our enthusiasm, on our hope, on the way we dig and plant and build, with Christ and with one another.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor