

The Family
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Is 5:1-7; Ps 80; Mt 21:33-43)

The vineyard is an important biblical symbol for Israel, God's chosen people. By His covenant, they inherit the Holy Land, in which they are to cultivate a life of holiness and fruitfulness. The first reading is Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard" (Is 5:1-7) which proclaims, "*The vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel.*" Likewise, Psalm 80 speaks of the vine which the Lord transplanted from Egypt into the vineyard of the Promised Land.

In the Gospel, Jesus takes up the theme of the Vineyard of Israel, but his parable condemns the tenants who have failed to produce a vintage for the Lord. Time and again God sent them prophets whom they did not heed, and even when He sent them His Son, they rejected him and put him to death. The parable describes how God will take His vineyard away from the tenants who failed in their stewardship, and hand it over to others who will produce fruit. This parable describes the transfer of the covenant from Israel and Jerusalem (the Old Testament), to the Church formed from Gentiles (New Testament). Whereas the Jews rejected and crucified the Messiah, the Gentiles welcomed the Gospel of Christ.

The Vineyard, then, is a Biblical image not only for the Promised Land of the Old Covenant, but also for the Church entrusted to the Gentiles. There is also a third way we can also understand the Vineyard, which is the family. The family is a microcosm of the universal Church. It is the local "vineyard" out of which the larger Vineyard of the Lord is created.

Just as a vineyard consists of carefully cultivated vines, which when they mature can be transplanted to begin new vineyards, children after they have been raised by their parents, are transplanted to begin new families.

The family is an enterprise. God establishes the family in order to bring forth a harvest, a "vintage" of fine wine. When God created man in the beginning He established the man with his wife in the garden, to cultivate it and produce a family: "be fruitful and multiply." Children are the fruit God seeks.

But not just any children. God wants good fruit, not bad. In the "Song of the Vineyard" from Isaiah, God made sure that good healthy vines were planted in the Holy Land. Yet, when He came looking for good grapes he found wild ones, that did not yield a good wine. The tenants had failed to cultivate them properly.

Raising a vineyard is hard and exacting work. The soil must be "spaded," cleared of stones (Is 5:2). The field must constantly be weeded. The growth of the vines must be carefully supervised and daily tended. It takes years to cultivate

good vines. They must be constantly trimmed and pruned. In fact, they require a certain weight of stress or pressure to grow well. But the result will be a good wine, highly prized and sought out.

Parents, likewise, are charged with raising good children. This means carefully cultivating their lives as they grow up, constantly correcting and imposing discipline so they do not grow wild and spoiled, and end up producing bad fruit.

In his apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world (*Familiaris consortio* 21), Pope John Paul II quotes an expression from Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes* 52) which he then develops. The family is “*a school of deeper humanity.*” It is the place where there is “*care and love for the little ones, the sick, the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows.*” The family is the first and irreplaceable “school of the social virtues” (36-37, 42-43). It is the very “school of following Christ”: all the members evangelize, and are evangelized (39,86).

This is the meaning of the “winepress” in the vineyard. The family is a “school.” Just as the grapes are collected into the winepress and turned into wine, the experience of the family members living together forms and transforms them into Christians through a process of education. Family life provides the daily opportunities for holiness, the fruit which God desires. This sacred school of virtue, love, and holiness is guided by the parents who are filled with God’s grace and teaching to accomplish the task.

In addition to a winepress, the Bible speaks of the “wall” or hedge which surrounds the vineyard, and the “tower.” Without them, the vineyard would not last. The wall protects the vulnerable vines from thieves and predators who would steal away the grapes before they can reach maturity. Families require strong moral defenses. Children must be protected from those influences which undermine the work of Christian parents.

The moral law – its rules and prohibitions – and the “domestic law” established by parents for their particular home, serve as the wall or barrier. They define the boundaries and identity of the family, who “we” are, and who we are not. Good laws protect and serve, assisting the work of that school within. Far from curtailing freedom, the law delineates the area in which it is safe to work, play, and grow as happy human beings. Stay “within the law” and you can do as you please. Break the law by going outside the wall, and you subject yourself to danger, as well as undermine your family bonds, your family identity.

Those families do well which have clear rules, articulated and evenly applied, domestic house rules which are built upon God’s own Ten

Commandments. Those children grow best who know exactly what the expectations and “limits” are, and stay within them.

If moral values serve as the wall of the vineyard, the faith revealed in Scripture and taught by the Church serves as its tower. Faith gives a “higher perspective” as well as an authority on life. It is through the tower one must pass to enter and leave the vineyard. The faith is a family’s anchor, the source and summit of its activity.

Another way to understand the wall and the tower of the vineyard is through the sacrament of Matrimony. In the Song of Songs, Solomon’s wedding is depicted in terms of a Vineyard, in which the love of the couple is celebrated (cf. Sng 2:9,4:12). Viewed in this perspective, the tower is the headship of the man, while the wall is the love of the woman. Together, they form the protective enclosure that creates and serves the family. The permanence and exclusivity of the marriage bond, together with the authoritative role given to parents by God, create the secure and structured environment in which children can be raised and flourish.

The family is the domestic Church. It is the microcosm and basic cell of the larger Church. In Christ God establishes a new Vine for all mankind (Jn 15), so that each individual family might have access to his “new wine.” He is the owner of the vineyard of our lives, we are its tenants. Let us be faithful workers in the vineyard given us by the Lord, cultivating healthy fruit in the lives of our children, producing in our families that harvest worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven.