

You may be aware that Pope Francis visited Assisi this weekend to complete his new encyclical letter on the environment. I am sure that over the coming days the letter will be translated and published in many languages. Therefore I will finish my series of homilies on this topic with a final one on the contents of this letter once it is published and an English translation is available. Meanwhile I have prepared some thoughts based on the parable that we have just heard in the Gospel Reading (Matthew 21:33-43).

The parable which Jesus tells today has a timeless quality. The chief priests and elders of the people can see how the parable applies to them, and yet it also speaks directly to our time and place and I am sure times and places in between also.

True, there are not many vineyards around Lincoln, but if we walk up and down the High Street in town, we can see how the relationship between owners and business tenants often plays out. If the tenant of a business can't generate the income to pay the rent then the owner will take action to bring in another tenant who will be able to make a profit both for the tenant and the owner.

However this isn't a parable about best practice in business but rather about the 'kingdom of God'. So who is the owner, who are the tenants, what is the fruit that the owner is seeking, both for those who heard the parable from the lips of Jesus and for those of us who hear it proclaimed in the liturgy today?

The parable is addressed to the 'chief priests and elders of the people' and it is told to them in the Temple in the presence of a larger crowd. When Jesus began to speak of a vineyard they all would have recognised the reference to the words of the prophet Isaiah that we heard in our First Reading (Isaiah 5:7) and also as the response to the psalm, 'The vineyard of the Lord is the House of Israel'. Jesus is warning the religious leaders of the people that they have not fulfilled their role in respect to the people of Israel. The time of their authority is coming to an end. If we were to read on a few further verses in the Gospel we would hear that 'the chief priests and the elders wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds who regarded him as a prophet' (Matthew 21:46). Keeping this in mind should steer us clear of any interpretation of the parable that sees a wholesale rejection of the Jewish people in favour of the Gentiles. Unfortunately and incorrectly such an interpretation has been proposed at various stages in the history of the church. It is important to remember that the community to which Matthew would have addressed his Gospel more than likely consisted of a very high proportion of members who would have come to faith in Jesus from a Jewish background.

But what does the parable say to us today. Are we producing the fruits of the kingdom that Jesus asks us to? This coming week sees the Feast of the recently canonised Saint John Henry Newman. It was he who said, 'God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next'. Individually and collectively we all have a mission from God. Some of us may work out our vocation in life quite quickly, others may spend the greater part of their lives discerning what their particular role and mission is. However it is God's mission, and if we are unwilling to play our part then God will find others to take our place. Do we see this happening around us? I

think of both the fact that our own congregation is boosted by new parishioners some of whom have joined us from overseas and also of the fact that it is some of the newer and independent churches who are leading in the city on many of the social projects that used to be led by ourselves and some of the other well established churches.

So taking encouragement from the word of Saint Paul in the Second Reading (Philippians 4:6) we pray for the grace that we might know and be able to fulfil our mission in life, our share in the work of tending the Lord's vineyard. Then we will know that peace which only God can give us.

For video version see: <https://youtu.be/bFUYql04wpE>