

Bible Study

For 17th Sunday after Trinity *(Proper 22)*

Isaiah 5.1-7

Philippians 3.4b-14

Matthew 21.33-46

Opening prayer

Creator God, who calls us to follow,
we are on journeys,
individual journeys and shared journeys,
experiences that are ours alone and ours together.
Guide us on our journey this day
and help us to keep our eyes on the goal.
Amen.

Introduction

To the New Testament Reading



Today we discover how Paul presents his old identity and also describes the new one that is still emerging (something that may take the rest of his life – and that's okay!).

The transformation is something like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, or a nymph into a dragonfly.

In both cases, the before and after identities are wonderful, incredible, beautiful – but the final form is the end goal.

Old Testament: Isaiah 5.1-7

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.</p> <p>² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.</p> <p>³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.</p> <p>⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?</p> <p>⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.</p> <p>⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.</p> <p>⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!</p>	<p>¹⁻² I'll sing a ballad to the one I love, a love ballad about his vineyard: The one I love had a vineyard, a fine, well-placed vineyard. He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds, and planted the very best vines.</p> <p>He built a lookout, built a winepress, a vineyard to be proud of. He looked for a vintage yield of grapes, but for all his pains he got junk grapes.</p> <p>³⁻⁴ "Now listen to what I'm telling you, you who live in Jerusalem and Judah. What do you think is going on between me and my vineyard? Can you think of anything I could have done to my vineyard that I didn't do? When I expected good grapes, why did I get bitter grapes?"</p> <p>⁵⁻⁶ "Well now, let me tell you what I'll do to my vineyard: I'll tear down its fence and let it go to ruin. I'll knock down the gate and let it be trampled. I'll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for - thistles and thorns will take over. I'll give orders to the clouds: 'Don't rain on that vineyard, ever!'"</p> <p>⁷ Do you get it? The vineyard of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies is the country of Israel. All the men and women of Judah are the garden he was so proud of. He looked for a crop of justice and saw them murdering each other. He looked for a harvest of righteousness and heard only the moans of victims.</p>	<p>I will sing a song about my friend's vineyard that was on the side of a fertile hill.</p> <p>² My friend dug the ground, removed the stones, and planted the best vines. He built a watchtower and dug a pit in rocky ground for pressing the grapes. He hoped they would be sweet, but bitter grapes were all it produced.</p> <p>³ Listen, people of Jerusalem and of Judah! You be the judge of me and my vineyard.</p> <p>⁴ What more could I have done for my vineyard? I hoped for sweet grapes, but bitter grapes were all that grew.</p> <p>⁵ Now I will let you know what I am going to do. I will cut down the hedge and tear down the wall. My vineyard will be trampled and left in ruins.</p> <p>⁶ It will turn into a desert, neither pruned nor hoed; it will be covered with thorns and briars. I will command the clouds not to send rain.</p> <p>⁷ I am the LORD All-Powerful! Israel is the vineyard, and Judah is the garden I tended with care. I had hoped for honesty and for justice, but dishonesty and cries for mercy were all I found.</p>

Reflection and Bible notes

Old Testament: Isaiah 5.1-7

Isaiah's parable of the unfruitful vineyard is described by the writer as a love song (v.1). The singer begins by dedicating the song to her beloved who owns a vineyard. He carefully tills the land and plants choice vines, but instead of the good crop that he expects, his vines yield sour grapes. Quickly the subject changes in verse 3 from the abstract farmer to the real people of Jerusalem and Judah who at this point are the listeners to the song.

The tone changes from a pretty song to a harsh detailing of what will be done to the vineyard that yields bad fruit. It will be devoured and trampled down. It will be wasted and no rain will fall on it. No rain means no sustenance, no possibility for growth. The song ends with verse 7, where it is interpreted as allegory. The vineyard belongs to none other than God and the vineyard is the house of Israel and the people of Judah, who have let God down badly and not behaved justly. God expects the people, the whole community, to manage the vineyard justly – and if not, they will be trampled and destroyed.

New Testament: Philippians 3.4-14

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.</p> <p>⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,^[a] the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ^[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.</p> <p>¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;^[c] but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved,^[d] I do not consider that I have made it my own;^[e] but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly^[f] call of God in Christ Jesus.</p>	<p>We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials. You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book. ⁷⁻⁹ The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, first-hand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—<i>God's</i> righteousness.¹⁰⁻¹¹ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.</p> <p>¹²⁻¹⁴ I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.</p>	<p>Others may brag about themselves, but I have more reason to brag than anyone else. ⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old,^[a] and I am from the nation of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a true Hebrew. As a Pharisee, I strictly obeyed the Law of Moses. ⁶ And I was so eager that I even made trouble for the church. I did everything the Law demands in order to please God.</p> <p>⁷ But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. ⁸ Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have given up everything else and count it all as garbage. All I want is Christ ⁹ and to know that I belong to him. I could not make myself acceptable to God by obeying the Law of Moses. God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ. ¹⁰ All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life. I want to suffer and die as he did, ¹¹ so that somehow I also may be raised to life.</p> <p>¹² I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. ¹³ My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead. ¹⁴ I run toward the goal, so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.</p>

Bible notes

New Testament: Philippians 3.4-14

Paul sets out his credentials by citing the marks of his Jewish identity (vv.4-6) – he was once part of the ruling elite condemned in the passage from Matthew. None of that means anything to him any longer; in fact, it is a disadvantage and an identity he is willing to give up. Not that Paul ever shows any sign of turning his back on his Judaism; it is simply that what he has in Christ matters so much more, and is available to Jews and Gentiles alike. So, he stands firm against those who want Gentile believers in Christ first to become Jews. Faith in Christ is all that matters.

Faith in Christ, however, is a tough road. Paul doesn't want to claim too much for himself. He is striving towards the goal of resurrection from the dead, but not even he has secured it yet. Indeed, he is not able to reach the goal alone; it is only because 'Christ Jesus has made me his own' (v.12) that it becomes possible. Remaking his identity 'in Christ' is a big project that he has not yet fully achieved, but it is his ultimate goal (v.14).

Gospel: Matthew 21.33-46

<i>(New Revised Standard Version)</i>	<i>(The Message)</i>	<i>(Contemporary English Version)</i>
<p>³³ ‘Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴ When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵ But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” ³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ ⁴¹ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’</p> <p>⁴² Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;^[1] this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”?’</p> <p>⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.^[2] ⁴⁴ The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’^[3]</p> <p>⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.</p>	<p>³³⁻³⁴ “Here’s another story. Listen closely. There was once a man, a wealthy farmer, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it, dug a winepress, put up a watchtower, then turned it over to the farmhands and went off on a trip. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent his servants back to collect his profits. ³⁵⁻³⁷ “The farmhands grabbed the first servant and beat him up. The next one they murdered. They threw stones at the third but he got away. The owner tried again, sending more servants. They got the same treatment. The owner was at the end of his rope. He decided to send his son. ‘Surely,’ he thought, ‘they will respect my son.’ ³⁸⁻³⁹ “But when the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. ‘This is the heir! Let’s kill him and have it all for ourselves.’ They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him. ⁴⁰ “Now, when the owner of the vineyard arrives home from his trip, what do you think he will do to the farmhands?” ⁴¹ “He’ll kill them—a rotten bunch, and good riddance,” they answered. “Then he’ll assign the vineyard to farmhands who will hand over the profits when it’s time.” ⁴²⁻⁴⁴ Jesus said, “Right—and you can read it for yourselves in your Bibles: The stone the masons threw out is now the cornerstone. This is God’s work; we rub our eyes, we can hardly believe it! “This is the way it is with you. God’s kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life. Whoever stumbles on this Stone gets shattered; whoever the Stone falls on gets smashed.”</p> <p>⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ When the religious leaders heard this story, they knew it was aimed at them. They wanted to arrest Jesus and put him in jail, but, intimidated by public opinion, they held back. Most people held him to be a prophet of God.</p>	<p>Jesus told the chief priests and leaders to listen to this story: A land owner once planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it and dug a pit to crush the grapes in. He also built a lookout tower. Then he rented out his vineyard and left the country. ³⁴ When it was harvest time, the owner sent some servants to get his share of the grapes. ³⁵ But the renters grabbed those servants. They beat up one, killed one, and stoned one of them to death. ³⁶ He then sent more servants than he did the first time. But the renters treated them in the same way. ³⁷ Finally, the owner sent his own son to the renters, because he thought they would respect him. ³⁸ But when they saw the man’s son, they said, “Someday he will own the vineyard. Let’s kill him! Then we can have it all for ourselves.” ³⁹ So they grabbed him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰ Jesus asked, “When the owner of that vineyard comes, what do you suppose he will do to those renters?” ⁴¹ The chief priests and leaders answered, “He will kill them in some horrible way. Then he will rent out his vineyard to people who will give him his share of grapes at harvest time.” ⁴² Jesus replied, “You surely know that the Scriptures say, ‘The stone that the builders tossed aside is now the most important stone of all. This is something the Lord has done, and it is amazing to us.’ ⁴³ I tell you that God’s kingdom will be taken from you and given to people who will do what he demands. ⁴⁴ Anyone who stumbles over this stone will be crushed, and anyone it falls on will be smashed to pieces.”^[4]</p> <p>⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these stories, they knew that Jesus was talking about them. ⁴⁶ So they looked for a way to arrest Jesus. But they were afraid to, because the people thought he was a prophet.</p>

Bible notes

Gospel: Matthew 21.33-46

Jesus' parable of the vineyard begins in much the same way as the one in Isaiah. The Jewish leaders would have recognised the story's scriptural symbolism. They knew what Isaiah did with it. They probably felt comfortable that they knew where Jesus was going with his parable. That he was, in effect, telling them of a dark event of the past, one that everyone knows about, but was going to end by telling them, 'but it's all right, things are different now'. Except Jesus didn't do that. Instead, the ending in which the tenants are driven out and new tenants brought in is deeply disturbing: more disturbing than Isaiah's changed ending was in his day.

And it is disturbing because it is about those who are listening. It is about the moral failings of the Pharisee 'class' in relation to the values of the kingdom. God will endorse only those who 'produce the fruits of the kingdom' (v.43), and is calling them out for their abuse of power.

The links between the lectionary readings

The readings from Isaiah and Matthew (and the Psalm) are linked by strong vineyard imagery, although this is not shared with Philipians. Having said that, Paul's journey began as a member of the house of Israel (v.5), so the vineyard imagery would have been well known to him. And all three readings have something to say about the behaviour of the community as a whole. Should the people follow the rules set down by the religious elite, or should they look to produce the fruits of God's kingdom?

Picture Pointers:



- What are the goals you are reaching for?
- How does it feel to see heaven as a 'goal'?
- What impact does 'knowing Christ' have on your identity?

Prayers of intercession

God of one and God of all, we pray for:

those who don't know who they are,

who can't understand themselves or their place in society –

God of all, we pray for them.

Those who don't 'fit in',

who are or seem to be different –

God of all, we pray for them.

Those who don't know where they come from,

their heritage or home, their family or bloodline –

God of all, we pray for them.

Those who feel lost and isolated, confused and afraid,

rudderless or homeless, strangers in a strange land –

God of all, we pray for them.

Those who wish they were someone else,

or somewhere else, in some other time and place –

God of all, we pray for them.

In your great mercy, Lord,

hear our prayers and grant surer journeys for them all. **Amen.**

A personal prayer

I am me, Lord, and I know I get things wrong.

I also know I get some things right.

I am me and I know you love me.

Help me to follow the way you would have me travel. **Amen.**

Live your faith

Try to be aware of the different 'hats' you wear during your day (see If the hat fits). At the end of each day, think about whether you have worn any hat that fits the role of being a follower of Jesus. If not, think about how you might do so the next day.