

*Sermon for 5 Lent, Year C
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
25 March, 2007*

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is teaching in the Temple. This is part of the run-up to his crucifixion. He has already made all kinds of enemies, and he is getting more and more straightforward in his judgments about certain people. Like the scribes and the chief priests. This parable is for them.

They have been entrusted the care of God's vineyard. But they have seen in it a vehicle for personal gain. Just a few verses previous to this, Jesus drove the moneychangers from the Temple precincts. And in this story, once again, he tells the truth about the religious professionals of his day. They have forgotten their mission. They have abandoned their trust. Instead of keeping well the vineyard for its owner, they plot how to obtain the vineyard for their very own. And they treat the true messengers of the Master shamefully and with violence.

Jesus also predicts two things at the end of this parable. First, he predicts his own treatment at the hands of these same men. To us looking back, the beloved son of the vineyard owner being put to death by the tenants seems rather a blatant allegory of his own death. But he also predicts what will happen after his resurrection. The owner "will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others." Ironically, because the scribes and priests knew that Jesus was speaking against them, they tried to do exactly what he had accused them of doing. They tried to kill him. Indeed, they eventually succeeded. And about forty years later, the Romans leveled the city of Jerusalem and destroyed its inhabitants. And the mission of Israel passed to those who followed Jesus, whether Jew or gentile.

So what lies behind the actions of the scribes and the priests? To us, their actions may seem stupid and myopic. Of course, we have the benefit of hindsight, not to mention two thousand years of meditation on the events. I think we can all more or less understand their basic motivation: selfishness, the complacency of a ruling class, the insecurity of that position under Roman rule, just plain discomfort with change. But these are people who studied the word of God. What was it that they ought to have seen and understood, but didn't?

Well, take a look at our reading from Isaiah. The context for this passage is the return from Babylon. From Isaiah's perspective, that's still 150 years in the future. They haven't even been taken into captivity yet. But here, it begins with a rehearsal of God's mighty, redemptive acts in the past. "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished,

quenched like a wick”. This is the decisive moment at which God formed his people. The destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the sea, after God held the water back for Israel.

But God’s actions are not only in the past. “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God’s miraculous provision does not end. “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Before, he only gave water for his people to drink. But in the future, he will do even more. There will be so much to drink that it will be a river flowing where there was only sand. Even the dumb beasts will honor God, the jackals and the ostriches. But God’s people are not just called and chosen. They are *formed*, just like Adam in the beginning. They are shaped by God himself for the very purpose of declaring his praise.

We so often think that God’s blessings are all in the past. And then it becomes our job to hold on to the blessings. And of course, since God’s actions are in the past, the blessings now belong to us, to do with as we see fit. But that’s not the way it works at all. It’s not our job to hold on to the past. “Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old,” God says. He doesn’t mean that we should forget what he did. He doesn’t mean that he’s changed his mind about things. What he means is that we shouldn’t limit him to the past. We say, “Thanks, God. I’ll take it from here.” When we should say, “Thanks for everything you’ve done. What are you going to do with me today?”

If the scribes and high priests had truly been interested in praising God, they would have been looking for the new thing. Not something new in the sense of changing direction. God doesn’t do that. But the next step in the unfolding miraculous plan of God. But they were still stuck trying to control what was left of past miracles, even though what was left wasn’t very much, in terms of the possibilities with God.

Of course, looking for the new thing that God has for us will mean giving things up in order to receive what God is trying to give us. St. Paul stands in contrast to the scribes and high priests. They gave up nothing and lost everything. St. Paul gave up everything. But what he gained was a level of relationship with God that had never been contemplated before. He says, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him”.

Saul of Tarsus gave up family, friends, position, security, and money to become Paul, the follower of Jesus Christ. But he also gave up more subtle things. He gave up his dreams of a pure and passionate, law-abiding Judaism. He gave up his opinion of gentiles. He gave up his claims to righteousness. He gave up what he thought was his right to direct the way God’s blessings of the past would bear

on the future. He says “I consider all those things garbage” compared with being in and with Jesus, being a part of the new and even more glorious thing that God is doing in the world.

He has been reading Isaiah. “One thing I do,” he says, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” It’s like running a race. “Jesus has made me his own.” And that new thing is so amazing that every day I am looking for the next development, the next unfolding; each thing higher or deeper or more difficult, but also more blessed. And finally, when my death is complete, when I have given to God all the rubbish in my life and in my self, then I will finally be completely like Jesus and partake in his resurrection.

But along the way, God will continue to amaze us with his grace and mercy and joy. As we give up our dreams, he will give us better ones than we could have come up with. As we give up our measly rights, he will give us blessings we couldn’t have imagined. As we give up our selves, he will make us more glorious than we could have hoped.