

Isaiah 5.1-7

Matthew 21.33-46

4th October 2026

Gardeners who Dream!

Gracious God, as we open the Scriptures and ponder their meaning, open our hearts and minds too. Give us courage to receive both comfort and challenge and grace to grow in understanding. Amen.

We are still in the Harvest season, and today's readings come from just such a setting. Yet these are not happy tales, but the story of a badly tended vineyards, with little hope of an abundant crop of grapes.

Vineyards were common in ancient Israel. They were often planted on hillsides, enclosed by a hedge or wall for protection, and watched over from a tower. A winepress would stand nearby, where the grapes were brought and crushed, often underfoot, amid joy, celebration, and singing. Vineyards were places of fertility, growth, care, pruning, and, finally, harvest joy. The harvest usually came in August and September, around the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot. Even today, at harvest time, our Jewish cousins build shelters, or tabernacles, in synagogue gardens. After the service, they gather beneath these canopies—often decorated by younger members with fruit and vegetables—for fellowship, bread, and wine.

It is in this context that, in our first reading, Isaiah likens the nation to God's vineyard. It is an image of a people carefully planted, lovingly nurtured, and protected by God. The hope is that their shared national life will bear the fruit of justice, righteousness, and faithfulness.

Yet this image and metaphor often became tarnished. The nation's leaders were not always good gardeners. They neglected the vineyard, and it sometimes ceased to be a place of life and became instead a garden of death.

Isaiah 5 was our first reading today and he penned these words some 800 years before the birth of Jesus, at a time in Judah's history when the nation was growing economically. Under kings like Uzziah, Ahaz and Hezekiah the rich were getting ever richer, yet often at the expense of the poor. Large landowners with big vineyards had the capital to buy up smaller ones. It's the reason for verse 8 in Isaiah chapter 5: *Woe betide those who add house to house and join field to field, until everyone else is displaced.* It was becoming the age, as many ages have become since, of the *privileged few*.

Isaiah – speaking prophetically, trying to get his listeners to see life through God's lense – laments this trend. As does his colleague, Jeremiah, a hundred years later, who says in his second chapter: God says '*I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?*'

So, it's in the context of these Jewish scriptures that Matthew tells this parable of Jesus'. The vineyard owner sends servants to see that the vineyard is being faithfully tended, but they are not welcomed. Finally, he sends his own son—perhaps pointing to Jesus himself as an inconvenient prophet—and the son is murdered rather than heard.

History often tells us that the mavericks whom one generation demonises can become the heroes of the next. Nelson Mandela, for example, was once dismissed by many as a terrorist, yet later came to be honoured as a world statesman.

Those sent to the vineyard in today's story are ignored, rejected, and killed. A place traditionally associated with life becomes, in this parable, a crucible of death. Yet, says the parable, the one the builders rejected eventually becomes the chief cornerstone.

This morning's parable prompts us to do a health check about our own listening. For God's voice can come to us in so many ways yet all too often go unheard. We too can fail to heed the message of modern day prophets. So, ours is a constant task of seeking to be open to the whispers of God calling to us, correcting, challenging or comforting us.

Now, sometimes us Christians are too hasty to interpret this parable as a story illustrating that God's vineyard is now The Church, rather than the nation of Israel.

Matthew, of course, being the most sincerely and enthusiastically Jewish

of all the gospel writers would never have wanted us to read these words in such a prejudicial manner.

Matthew loved the image of the vineyard. He cherished the Jewish Scriptures, including Isaiah, our first reading; and, like many of the other disciples even after the Ascension, he delighted in going up to the Temple to pray.

So he was not rejecting the shape of his culture or the faith in which he had been formed. These remained precious to him, and through them he encountered God. What he lamented was that the leaders of his community, both in the palace and in the Temple, seemed to have accommodated themselves to Rome and forgotten what it meant to honour God and remain faithful to Scripture.

A few years ago, one of our theological principals was either brave or foolish enough to write a book about church leadership. He came from a Free Church tradition, yet graciously said he was not automatically opposed to bishops. I am not sure whether that helped or hindered his book sales! What he went on to say, wisely I think, was that the crucial issue is not what we call our church leaders—bishops, moderators, or regional ministers—but who fills those roles. Are they prayerful, loving servant-shepherds with a genuine care for those entrusted to them? In Jesus' day, Matthew clearly believed that those holding the most important civil and religious offices were not good gardeners of the vineyard. They were not nurturing the crop, protecting the grapes, or seeking a harvest of justice and faithfulness.

The hymn *I vow to thee my country* is a little too nationalistic for some in its first verse, yet I love the beginning of verse 2 as it changes gear and begins to think not of a national kingdom but God's, the verse starting *But there's another country I've dreamed of long ago*.

So, perhaps after reading what is, it must be said, a somewhat grizzly gospel parable, how might we dream of what a more fruitful vineyard would look like? Because, says Jesus, it can be better than this; there can be nurture, growth and harvest. The vineyard can become the place it was intended to be, we need to become gardeners who dream!

And, perhaps in our dreaming we might make room for the idea that *growth* has more than one definition.

For the big farmers always on the lookout for a take-over in Isaiah 5,

growth meant gobbling up smaller vineyards and creating mega ones. In the process people often lost their jobs, identity and value. Instead of the vineyard being a community it was no more than a factory.

We are all, understandably, concerned by the current lack of growth in all mainstream churches. Numbers do matter – as George Carey used to say when he was Archbishop, *When the Church falls below a critical mass* we are in new days.

Yet, as every farmer and gardener knows, growth is about quality as well as quantity. There is a longing for beauty, diversity, viability, interaction and sustainability. Good gardeners know a thing or two about the passing of seasons and the value, even, of dormancy.

For spiritual gardeners the themes can be remarkably similar.

Indeed, our prayer is that a church like ours will be a place where everyone is valued and nurtured. A community of growth rooted in the love of God and bearing fruit. The fruit of the Spirit with characteristics such as love, joy and peace, patience, kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Indeed, those words from Galatians describe a truly wonderful harvest.

At the AFC book discussion group recently we read of a young women's quest for a deeper spirituality. She tries church after church and conference after conference, and some of these were big events and massive congregations, but she never felt she truly belonged. So, after much searching the book ends almost full circle as one Sunday, she's so exhausted by all the searching she decides just to go to the church around the corner. Once inside she finds the congregation is small enough to sit in a circle, yet at once she finds an integrity and depth amongst her fellow worshippers which has kept her there ever since. She found not hundreds of people, but a somewhat small company of fellow seekers after truth who had become well rooted and were lovingly and openly showing Christian growth as they displayed in church, and in the community beyond, the *Fruit of the Spirit*.

What sort of Vineyard do we dream about? And what kind of Vineyard are we becoming? Important questions.

So, happy gardening, in the name of God, the master Gardener who plants and longs for beautiful and productive Vineyards.