

## Trinity 17 – 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (Harvest Festival)

4 <sup>th</sup> October Trinity 17 Harvest Festival Dedication Festival Holy Communion	Isaiah 5 vv 1-7 p689 Philippians 3 vv 4b-14 p1180 Matthew 21 vv 33-46 p990	A&M 288 Praise O Praise 289 Come Ye Thankful 290 We Plough 459 Give Me Joy	EH 259 Come ye Thankful 493 Rejoice O Land 260 Fair Waved 262 We Plough the 261 To Thee O Lord 413 Now Thank We All
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It's been quite interesting to watch them creating a vineyard in Bush Valley. Historically, grapes were grown in Halling in the Middle Ages and hops were planted in both these villages and in much of Kent up until really quite recently. The dates of the school summer holidays still reflect the traditional requirement for children to be available to help with the harvest. So, in a way, it is like coming full circle that we are once more producing the ingredient for an alcoholic beverage. Psalm 104: 13. *He watereth the hills from above : the earth is filled with the fruit of thy works.* 14. *He bringeth forth grass for the cattle : and green herb for the service of men;* 15. *That he may bring food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man : and oil to make him a cheerful countenance, and bread to strengthen man's heart.*

I was commenting in the *Times* newspaper on an assertion which someone had made to the effect that agriculture couldn't be expected to adapt to changing conditions when I remarked that, in the period in which I have been walking my dogs in Bush Valley and Dean Valley, I have seen them planted with various cereals, rape and linseed, and grazed by sheep, cattle and horses, and that plenty of people in the village can remember when they were hop gardens. We do have a great deal to be thankful for at Harvest Festival.

Some people might say that it was another kind of harvest when they attempted to quarry Dean Valley for chalk to make cement. The lime and cement industries were a big employer around here for a couple of centuries and, surely, the demand for cement must still be growing with all these big infrastructure projects and housing developments on the table, but I cannot say that I am sorry that the quarry plan for Dean Valley fell through and that its unspoiled future appears to be safe. I am conscious of the danger of being a NIMBY – someone who makes use of new roads and railways and recognises the need for housing, hospitals, schools and places of employment, but always opposes these developments when they are planned for anywhere near where I live. There needs to be an open and honest public debate about how much development we believe is necessary and how much of our precious planet we are prepared to sacrifice in order to find space for it. It is not acceptable that the least desirable projects should simply be plonked down in the localities where people have the least political power and influence.

Tommy and I visit Bush Valley almost every day, often more than once. We saw the ground cleared and tilled. Then the vines were planted, each with its own little stick. As time has gone on and the plants have grown, so more supports have been added and protection - presumably against birds and insects. They are probably a couple of feet high now. I don't know how big they have to be before they fruit. The workers start really early and work hard. From their language, I should guess that they are mainly from Eastern Europe. They arrive in cars and vans. Tommy and I don't like that or the tractors they use sometimes or the fact that they have effectively made another road into the valley. He's afraid of motor vehicles and I just don't like noise and fumes in what was not so long ago a perfectly peaceful place. We have to watch that we don't get run over where the new road crosses the old path. They are not there all the time, however. There seem to be spurts of activity over a period and then the countryside reverts for a while to its normal tranquillity. Obviously a lot of hard work goes into vine growing and it must be a big investment on the part of those who have put up the capital. Most of us enjoy wine. Jesus Himself drank it, turned about 150 gallons of water into wine at a wedding feast lest they should run out, and consecrated it to be His Blood at the Last Supper and in the Christian Communion which He commanded us to continue until His coming again.

So wine is important and its culture is very ancient. Preparing and planting a vineyard is a major investment. Cultivating grapes is a skilled and demanding occupation, as is the production of wine from the resulting harvest. Expensive of time, labour and money, nevertheless the human race has engaged in viticulture for millennia, from the very beginning of civilisation.

Twice in the Old Testament, viticulture is used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and His people. Psalm 80 speaks of Israel as God's vine. He brought it out of Egypt and planted it in the Promised Land, providing it with everything it needed to flourish and to produce fruit, but, the psalmist complains, God's vine, God's vineyard has been broken down and burnt. Israel's enemies have defiled the Promised Land, invading, ravaging, destroying, stealing, killing. What has gone wrong? The psalmist pleads that God will deliver Israel through the work of an unnamed Saviour, Whom I would take to be the Son of David. Our Isaiah reading explains what has gone wrong. Israel, God's vineyard, has proved to be unfruitful. The fruits God looks for are justice and righteousness, but what He sees is oppression and what He hears are the cries of the oppressed. That's what's gone wrong. God has created Israel and given Israel everything she needs to flourish and yet Israel has rejected God and His commandments. This is why God has allowed the nations to wreak such devastation on His vineyard. It is God's judgment on them for their refusal to act justly.

In today's Gospel, Jesus expands on Isaiah's parable. He summarises the Old Testament and introduces the New. Not only did God establish Israel in the Promised Land and give them every blessing, when they rejected God and His Law, He did not at once destroy them. Time after time, He sent His servants the prophets, seeking the fruits of justice and righteousness. What happened, however, only too often, was that they refused to listen to the prophets and maltreated the authentic messengers of the Word of God, preferring to listen to false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear, rather than true prophets who told them what they needed to hear. So far, so Old Testament. Now, however, in the New Testament, God sends His Son to seek out a true harvest of justice and righteousness. *They will reverence my Son*, he says. But, of course, they don't reverence the Son; they kill Him. But that isn't the end of the matter. God raises the Son from the dead. Changing the metaphor, *the stone which the builders (the leaders of Israel) rejected is become the head of the corner* – the most important stone of all, the one on which everything else depends. *God hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.* Justice and righteousness will prevail and those who reject them, those who reject God and His Son, will face judgment themselves. The vineyard, the Kingdom of God, will be taken from them *and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof* – ie justice and mercy. Those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take in the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the sick and those in prison inherit the *kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.*

We can read the Lord's Parable of the Vineyard in three ways. Parables can be understood in more ways than one. They are open-ended, multivalent. We can think of those who rejected the succession of prophets and, last of all, the Son, as the priests and politicians of Israel, the leaders who ought to have known better. Those to whom the kingdom is given when it is taken away from them are then the poor and lowly who have themselves been oppressed for centuries by the rich and powerful who have always disregarded justice and righteousness. Or we can read the parable as saying that all the people of Israel have rejected first the Law and the Prophets, and then Jesus, the Son, crucifying the Son of God - the rejection of Israel and the mission to the Gentiles being the result of their turning a deaf ear to the Word of God. This is a credible and probable interpretation, but it is a dangerous one. It is not true that all the Jews rejected Jesus and there is no scriptural warrant whatever for persecuting the Jews. Anti-Semitism is a stain on the history of the Christian Church and there ought to be no place for it in our hearts. God is the Judge and He alone. Which brings me to my third way of looking at this parable. If we are the people of God, the new Israel, are we bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit? Are we listening to His Word and obeying His commandments. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.* St Paul says: *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you.* Unless we be reprobates, Jesus Christ is in us and we are in Him. He says that He is the vine and we are the branches. It is in our communion with Christ that we are able to fulfil His perfect Law of love and bring forth the fruits of justice and righteousness.