
Sermon for Evensong on the Sunday next before Easter, 25th March 2018

Isaiah 5:1-7, Mark 12:1-12 Taking back Control of God's Vineyard

Two vineyards in the Bible. One is a perfectly good vineyard, nothing remarkable about it. Like Denbies, say. Actually there is something remarkable about our local vineyard. Apparently it's the biggest single vineyard in Europe. It is, really. Not in France, or Italy, or Portugal, or Spain - but here in Surrey. And jolly good it is, too. I like 'Surrey Gold' just as much as Gavi di Gavi. They're both excellent.

The other vineyard has something wrong with it. It's suffering from noble rot, or something. Something which is interfering with the growth of the vines and the swelling of the grapes. In the vineyard in the Book of Isaiah, the distinction is between 'grapes' and 'wild grapes'. I'm not sure why it's not a good thing for the grapes to be 'wild'. Wild strawberries are the nicest, I think. And D & T Car Wash, who, I think, are very good, advertise that they use soap with 'wild cleaning power'. But clearly from the context here, we're meant to take it that the wildness here - wild grapes - makes them no good.

One vineyard, in St Mark's Gospel, is fine, and productive. But the snag is, that the people who run it are crooks. They won't pay their rent to their landlord - they abuse, even kill, his reps, when they visit to collect the dues; and indeed, eventually they kill the landowner's son.

The other vineyard is just hopeless, not because it is badly run, badly managed, but because it just doesn't grow good grapes. Even despite its being 'a vineyard in a very fruitful hill'. [Is. 5:1] But the reason, Isaiah tells us, is that this vineyard is an allegory, it is not a real vineyard, but a mythical reference to the Israelites. They, God's chosen people, the Israelites, are the dud vineyard. 'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant.' They're not fruitful or productive, even though they're planted, they're set up, absolutely fine.

But how lovely to be someone's 'pleasant plant'! I think that must be a prayer to say at Squires' garden centre across the road.

So I think that Jesus was probably alluding, he was harking back, to the story of the wild grape vineyard when he told the parable of his vineyard. Or rather, he was making it clear that the story wasn't really just about grapes and a vineyard. If the man who 'planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dugged a plane for the winefat, and built a tower,' was actually a symbol for God, and if, when He 'let it out to husbandmen', tenant farmers, it was a symbol of what God had done in creation. We, the descendants of Adam and

Eve, have the care of God's creation. Are we trustworthy managers? Or is it rather that, however well we do, God periodically throws a spanner in the works?

But one thing that Jesus says is clear, in his allegory. That is the bit about the landlord's son being killed. It is so reminiscent of the history of Jesus. It's tricky. The story reflects, on the face of it, pretty badly on the Jews. They were the chosen people. They, the evil husbandmen, killed the Son of the owner. When, on Good Friday, we say a litany of complaints called the Reproaches, starting with

*'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow
which was brought upon me,
which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger'*

and so on, there is a warning in the Service Book [Common Worship, Times and Seasons, Lent'] that the Reproaches are sometimes taken to be bigoted, to be anti-Jewish, but they mustn't be taken that way. A better way of looking at it is to see the Reproaches - and the criticism of the Dud Vineyard - as being directed not just against the Jewish people, but also against anyone, any human being. Against us, even. Are we stealing, keeping to ourselves, what should rightfully be given to our heavenly Father? Are we taking proper care of the Father's vineyard, and giving Him his proper dues?

Somebody was saying goodbye to me the other day. They said, 'Have a nice Easter holiday'. I felt it sounded a bit awkward, although of course I knew what the nice, friendly person meant. But Easter, and Holy Week - this week, starting today - which leads up to it, the Easter season, isn't just a jolly time. It's serious.

Passiontide, the two weeks immediately before Easter, are leading up to the most important time in the Christian year. The Passion. At the time of the Passover, in the Jewish tradition. Christ lived. Christ died. Then the glorious resurrection. Christ was resurrected. He rose again from the dead. Today at the start, on Palm Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem.

In the Roman world, a general who had engaged in a successful battle, or a successful war, would parade his captives and all the booty he had plundered, through the streets of Rome. The Emperor would have given him permission to celebrate what was called a 'Triumph'. Some generals were refused triumphs, because it might make them too big for their boots.

Rome operated devolved administration. People were trusted to do a good job for the Roman state; for 'SPQR' (senatus populusque Romanus), the

senate, the government and the people of Rome. But if a general came back in triumph from massive conquests, he might consider himself greater than the current emperor. And then there would be a risk of revolution. It was similar in the various provinces, such, for example, as ancient Palestine. There, there was tension, as we all remember, between the Roman provincial government, headed by Pontius Pilate, and the devolved Jewish administration.

I went to a very interesting lecture - it was rather more than just a lecture - at St Paul's Cathedral on Monday last week. It was run by the St Paul's Institute in collaboration with the BBC, and led by Prof. Michael Sandel, of Harvard University, who calls himself 'The Public Philosopher', and who conducts live debates with audiences about philosophical questions, rather in the way that I imagine Socrates must have done in ancient Athens, by asking his audience questions, and challenging their preconceptions by examining the logical implications of what they thought.

The topic on Monday was 'Democracy and the Common Good: What do we Value?' A subtitle was, 'What does it mean to be a citizen?' It was recorded for BBC Radio 4, and you will be able to listen to a distilled version, 45 minutes edited down from the two hours of discussion and debate, on the wireless on Tuesday, at 9 am, repeated at 9.30 pm, under the title 'Citizens of Nowhere?' [See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09ws5p6>] I won't spoil it for you. Suffice to mention that the trailer says, 'With the help of a live audience, [Prof. Sandel] asks whether globalisation and deepening inequality have eroded the bonds that hold communities together. He enquires if the continuing debate over Brexit reveals competing notions of political identity. Should we aspire to be citizens of the world, or is a citizen of the world a citizen of nowhere? He wonders if patriotism is a sentiment we should encourage or a prejudice we should overcome and whether, in diverse societies such as ours, a politics of the common good is even possible.'

It is a similar question to the one faced in the Roman Empire, for instance in Palestine. Was one a citizen of somewhere local, where one had grown up or where one paid taxes, or were you like St Paul, who said, 'Civis Romanus sum', 'I am a Roman citizen'? (Acts 22:25f) Were you then, are you now, a citizen of the world, or a local chap? During the discussion on Monday, Prof. Sandel brought in the Bishop of Kensington, Dr Graham Tomlin, to sum up the debate. The Bishop is the one who, with all the local churches, has been very much involved in supporting the residents of Grenfell Tower following the terrible fire there.

Dr Tomlin suggested that there was a sort of tension between being local, and being universal. Prof. Sandel had opened the discussion by asking his invited audience, of students from the LSE, to imagine themselves as running

a food bank in a German town. Supplies of food were getting tight, and demand was rising. Should one restrict the hand-outs of food just to German people, and not to other nationalities - or should the only criterion be hunger, be the people's need? Dr Tomlin suggested that, if one were a Christian, the answer to such conundrums was in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Nationality - even nationality in a context of enmity between nations - was not relevant; it didn't worry the Good Samaritan. We don't know for sure what the nationality of the man was, who 'fell among thieves' on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho; but it seems most likely that he was Jewish, an Israelite - as otherwise it wouldn't have been so striking that first a 'priest' and then a 'Levite' passed him by. Samaritans and Jews were opponents even if not actual enemies. But it didn't matter to the Good Samaritan. So the Bishop suggested that nationality wasn't the be-all and end-all, shouldn't be the be-all and end-all, where Christians - where we - are concerned.

Interestingly, the audience, both the students on the stage and the several hundred people in the cathedral nave, were more open to internationalism and less inclined to nationalism or parochialism, than I think Prof. Sandel was expecting. He was periodically taking straw polls of what people thought about the moral questions he posed. Overwhelmingly, in the Cathedral, people thought that the brotherhood of all mankind was much more worthwhile than 'taking back control', or whatever other pro-Brexit nostrums he posited. I suppose that is to be expected from an audience of people who go to St Paul's, whereas the average Daily Mail reader might have a less enlightened view.

So - as we begin to recall the momentous events of the first Holy Week - are we 'citizens of nowhere'? Or are we Good Samaritans? Whose vineyard is it? Are you looking after it properly? Or is it not worth looking after, because it's producing 'wild' grapes?

Amen.

Hugh Bryant