

Homily: 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

I have to confess that I'm not much of a gardener. There are many people who will vouch for that! But I do know many people who not only tend their gardens, but love their gardens. They gladly spend hours caring for the plants, removing weeds, coming up with new ideas, looking forward to the next green shoot or burst of new colour. I see something of this love and care in the description of the owner of the vineyard in today's first reading and Gospel. He loves his vineyard. He digs the soil, clears it of stones, digs a press, builds a tower and plants choice vines in it. Understandably, then, he expects it to yield fruit for him. But in both readings, he is disappointed.

The people of Israel knew very well that the whole image is an allegory of God and His people. Israel is the vineyard, called to produce good fruit for the owner, who is God. He loves His vineyard, His people, but they do not respond in kind. Instead of returning His love, they yield the bitter fruit of bloodshed, injustice and distress. In the Gospel the Lord goes further: God sent to the vineyard several groups of servants, who were beaten and killed by the tenants: these are the prophets, sent to announce God's message, who are persecuted and put to death by the religious leaders of the time. Finally, the owner sends his son: God sends His Son. But He too is beaten, rejected and killed.

There is an obvious question for us here: what fruit do we produce for the Lord? This parable invites us to reflect on the love we receive from Him, the ways in which He tends and cares for us. It invites us then to ask: what do I give Him in return? Do I yield a rich harvest for Him, or is the fruit of my life sometimes bitter? It's a fairly good starting point for an examination of conscience.

But the bitter fruit, the rejection of the prophets and the death of the Son is not the end of the story. Jesus points to this by quoting one of the psalms at the end of the parable: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the keystone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful to see." This phrase is used by the Church particularly at Easter, when we celebrate the Lord's resurrection. Jesus is the stone who was rejected and crucified by those who were supposed to be the builders of God's kingdom. But by His resurrection, He becomes our hope, He is beginning of a new creation, He opens for us the way to eternal life. He becomes the foundation of everything that follows, the keystone, the One on whom everything rests. This is the Lord's doing, and it is wonderful to see.

Last week I spoke a little about Walsingham; this week I put before you another wonderful shrine of Our Lady – her shrine at Lourdes in the south of France. There, I think, is a striking image of this saying. If you go and stand across the river from the grotto where Our Lady appeared, you see before you the basilica built over the site. It towers over the river and the pilgrims below. But at its base is the original rock of the grotto: uneven, jagged: a very imperfect place to build a church. Any builder in their right mind would want to build on a piece of level ground. They would reject this as a site on which to build. But now, the basilica is built there, and without the rock of the grotto the whole basilica would assuredly crumble. The uneven rock, rejected by builders of towns and cities, has become the

keystone of the house of God. It is an image of Christ. He was rejected by human leaders, but is the foundation of everything that is, the One on whom all creation depends.

As we seek to build up our lives, what do we reject? In what do we put our hope? Do we rely only on earthly support and help, rejecting the rock on which God wants us to build? Or do we have faith to put our trust in those things which the Lord teaches which are so often rejected by the world: genuine self-giving love, mercy, faithfulness, the Cross? There are so many aspects of our faith which can go against our instinct, and we are tempted to reject them for an easier path. But to build where the Lord, rather than the world, builds: that is the path to real joy, and the way to yield the good fruit He desires. This is what the Lord Himself does; and it is wonderful to see.

Fr Andrew

