

Homily for October 3, 1999
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 5:1-7
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-43

We don't own the vineyard of faith; we only work there.

A recent cartoon appearing in *The New Yorker* magazine showed a parishioner leaving church after Mass, shaking hands with the celebrant and saying, "Well you can go to hell too."

Folks, that is how this passage in Matthew 21 has been used for centuries – to condemn the Jews and anyone else who are seen as outsiders. Why so? This is why so: Jesus tells a parable. When they retell it, and write it down later on as gospel, those early Christians turn it into an allegory. And we have done the same thing ever since. Sometimes the allegorical method works well, as in the parable of the sower going out to sow his seed. But not in this case. Look at how this parable has usually been misinterpreted. The vineyard has been identified as the house of Israel. And why not – even Psalm 80 says this. The owner of the vineyard is God. The messengers who are mistreated are the prophets. And in this allegory – which, remember, is not true – the owner's son who is sent on scene immediately makes us think of Jesus. And who put him to death? The gospel answers, "That wicked crowd." For centuries afterwards, people have said, "Who put him to death? Those wicked Jews." Thus it became too easy to

misuse this parable – turned-into – allegory to justify anti-Semitism which has been the great sin of Christians, and for which the Roman Catholic Church recently and officially asked pardon.

But of course, the attitude of the tenants in the story is not limited to the authorities of first century Jerusalem. In refusing to admit that they owe everything to God, in refusing to accept their role of tenants, they typify an attitude that is all too common among professedly religious people, who are prone to act as if they own what has only been lent, as though God, church, religion, salvation, the truth, somehow belong to them by right. We all are subject to this temptation and very likely surrender to it in varying degrees. All too often in the history of Christianity, the arrogant assurance that they and they alone were in the right, that only they knew God and God's will, caused authorities to do to pagans or Jews, to Protestants or Catholics, to witches or dissidents, to a Joan of Arc or a John Huss or Thomas More, what the tenants did to the servants and the son in the parable. St. John Chrysostom was expelled from the archbishopric of Constantinople in the fifth century because his enemies, good churchmen all, decided that they and they alone knew what was good for the Church. Marguerite Porete, author of the beautiful

Mirror of Simple Souls, was burned at the stake in the 14th century because authorities didn't think what she wrote was sufficiently orthodox. St. John of the Cross was thrown in prison in the 16th century by his Carmelite brothers because his commitment to reform challenged their comfortable lifestyle. The authorities of the 19th century French church didn't want to listen to the peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous' stories of encounters with the Blessed Virgin because they were convinced that the vineyard belonged to them. During the second World War the Austrian bishops gave little support to the sacristan of the little town of St. Radegund, Franz Jagerstatter, whose refusal to join the German army because he believed Hitler and the Nazis were evil led to his execution; they were convinced they knew God's will better than a poorly educated lay person.

This parable is a warning to us all that we don't own the vineyard of faith – we only work there. It is a warning against self-righteousness. Everything that we have and everything that we are belong to God, not ourselves, and we all need the humility to recognize our status as tenants, as workers, not owners.

The great contribution that Catechumens and Candidates for full communion make to us is the reminder that all is gift – especially and including our faith.

As we baptize little Seth Patrick Ruebusch we are baptizing this child into the Faith which celebrates that all is and ever remains a gift from God – a gift we are called upon to share.

In his work *Conjectures of a Guilty By-Stander*, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, tells a wonderful story about “a saint, who at the point of death, removed his pontifical vestments (the garb a bishop wears) and *got out of bed*. He died on the floor, which

is only right: but one hardly has time to be edified by it – one is still musing over the fact that he had pontifical vestments on *in bed*.” Merton comments, “Let us examine our consciences...do we wear our mitres even to bed? I am afraid we sometimes do.”

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