October 8, 2017

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
Isa 5:1-7; Ps 80:12-16, 19-20; Phil 4:6-9; Matt 21:33-43

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

It is clear that the author of Matthew’s gospel was thinking of the metaphor of the vineyard found in today’s passage from Isaiah when telling the story about Jesus’ encounter with some who opposed him. In that metaphor, the vineyard represents God’s chosen people - cherished and cared for by God, as seen in the first reading and the inheritance of the son of the landowner, as seen in the gospel. The first reading is very moving; the gospel passage is problematic.

Most likely, the gospel story reflects two different controversies – the one between Jesus and his opponents as depicted in the story itself, and the one between the early church and the leaders of the synagogue of their time, which was the situation of the gospel writer. Both of these readings illustrate how reform movements often face opposition from well-established religious leadership. Such an interpretation remains a valid and quite relevant reading of the story. However, this story carries a longstanding and shameful history of interpretation as well, an interpretation that came to justify what is sometimes called ‘replacement theology.’

The story certainly describes how disreputable tenants of the vineyard were replaced. Such replacement can be seen as a kind of reform when all involved belong to the same group, as is the case in the original story. However, when one group is replaced by another discrete political, ethnic, or religious body, different dynamics come into play. This was the case in the conflict between the early church and the synagogue. Such theological difference is not unusual, and normally it is not a threat to either group. However, when one group achieves a position of life-threatening authority over the other, replacement could be used to justify extinction. This has often been the case with Christianity and the Jewish people down through the centuries. It is this fact that makes the interpretation of the gospel story problematic.

Since the time of Vatican II and its document *Nostra Aetate*, the church has insisted that the Jewish people have not been rejected by God (*NA, #4*). Even today, one of the pressing issues in Christian/Jewish theological dialogue is the question of covenant membership: How can two diverse religious bodies claim exclusive covenant relationship with God. Some believe that there are two parallel covenants; others maintain that there is only one covenant and the two bodies are both part of it, but in different ways. To date there is no agreement. One thing is certain, neither religious body holds that the Jewish people have been rejected by God and have lost their covenant relationship.

How are we today to understand this gospel passage so that we do not fall into an anti-Jewish quagmire? If we see it for what the story actually says, we will understand that the opposition is not between two distinct groups, but between factions or circles within the same group,
factions and circles such as also exist within the church today. Without presuming to identify which current position is wrong and will be replaced, we can be challenged to strive to correct anything about our position that warrants correction. In other words, we should read this story as a call to reform ourselves.

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