

27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
MAN'S ABUSES OF GOD'S PRIVILEGES

"But the tenants seized his servants, thrashed one, killed another, and stoned a third" (Matt. 21: 35)

For the third consecutive week, we are taking life lessons from the vineyard. The week before last, the landowner sent men to his vineyard at different times to work. In the end, he paid all of them one denarius each irrespective of the time. Last week, the father with two sons asked them to go to his vineyard and work: the first son said he would not go but later thought about it and went; the second son, who had promised to go, did not do so. Today, we are again back to the vineyard. So what do we have here? What are the Readings telling us? What is Jesus inviting us to do?

In the First Reading (Is. 5: 1-7), taken from Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard, the prophet describes God's special care and His expectations of His people. Note that "The vineyard of the Lord is the House of Israel" (Is. 5: 7). Thus, this is about the Chosen People. The song ends on a disappointing note as the vineyard did not produce the expected fruits: "I expected My vineyard to yield good grapes. Why did it yield sour ones instead?" The "men of Judah, that chosen plant", lived this life of disappointment and reneged on their promises one after the other, humiliating, disobeying and killing the prophets up to the time of Jesus.

The Chosen People, The Vineyard of the Lord, especially their leaders continued with this life of obstinacy and recalcitrance up to the time of Jesus. Thus in this periscope (Matt. 21: 33-43), Jesus was responding to the teachers of the Law, the elders and chief priests of the people, who questioned His authority: "What authority do you have to do this? Who gave you this authority?" Jesus had just told them the Parable of the Two Sons concerning their neglect of the ministry of John the Baptist, which He ended by saying: "Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you ... You were witnesses of this, but you neither repented nor believed him" (Matt. 21: 31, 32). Immediately after this, Jesus told this Parable of the Wicked Tenants

This parable was intended to be a strong warning to the chief priests and teachers of the Law, who were already plotting to kill Jesus, whom they failed to recognise as the Messiah they had been expecting for centuries. The landowner here is God; Israel is the vineyard of the Lord; the religious and political leaders are the tenants. The parable points almost directly at Israel's history of ingratitude, infidelity and hardheartedness, reminiscent of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard more than seven hundred years before. This parable reveals certain important attributes of God and our (human) weaknesses.

God's Trust: The landowner did all that was needed to be done: he fenced round the vineyard, dug a winepress in it, built a tower; then leased it to the tenants and went abroad. He did not even stay around to supervise them. He trusted in their faithfulness and accountability to deliver. This is how God trusts us with His gifts and grace. He gives us more than we could ever ask for but what do we do with them. He has entrusted the earth to us all: "to fill and to subdue" (Gen. 1: 28). How have we responded to this trust? How faithful have we been? When the Son of Man comes, will He find any fruits in us?

God's Patience: The patience of God is revealed in the landowner who sent messenger after messenger to the tenants; he gave them chance after chance to change in their response. He did not react to their abuses and inhuman treatments of his messengers but waited till the very end after they killed his son. God has been very patient with us: we commit sins after sins, and God keeps forgiving us and allowing us to repent. How long more do we need to wait?

God's Judgement: There was that time when the tenants' cups ran over with their wickedness and abuses, then the master struck by taking the vineyard from them and giving it to those who would be faithful. Jesus ended by saying: "I tell you, then, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matt. 21: 43). St. Peter in his epistle cautions us not to think of the Lord's patience as weakness or delay; but rather to see it as an opportunity for us to repent (2 Pet. 3: 15).

Human Privileges: The landowner ensured that the vineyard was well-equipped for the tenants to do their work well with the least difficulties. At every stage of our lives, that God calls us, He provides the necessary tools we need to accomplish the tasks at hand. He created us in love, gives us intellect and the ability to explore. How have we used these privileges? How productive have we been? Do we use it to build or to destroy; to gather or to scatter?

Human Abuse of Freedom and Deliberateness: Not only did the landowner do all that was needed to be done for the vine to yield fruitfully, but he also gave the tenants the freedom to work at their pace with imagination and creativity. Instead of maximising the opportunity, they abused the freedom and deliberately plotted evil against the goodness of the landowner: "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and take over his inheritance" (Matt. 21: 38). The men of Judah did this to the prophets of God time after time and were plotting the killing of the Son of God. Similar incidents do happen in businesses, care homes, offices, schools and many places when workers employed to facilitate growth, progress and wellbeing turn around to fraudulently exploit, abuse and liquidate the enterprise. This is how some of us, if not many of us, deal with the freedom God has given to us.

Man's accountability: No matter what happens, we must never forget that we shall be held accountable for our acts of commission and omission. When the "time of harvest" comes, and the Master returns, we shall be called to render the accounts of our stewardship. Are we prepared?

My dear friends, the story of the children of Israel is our story if we are sincere to ourselves: it is the story of our disobedience, abuses of God's privileges, gifts and grace. It is the story of the wastefulness of our leaders, who misappropriate and plunder the resources of our nations in brazen flagrance and shameless audacity. It is the story of human injustice and abuses of power. It is the story of human neglect and fraudulence. Against these, St. Paul provides the antidote: "Finally, brothers, fill your minds with everything true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise" (Phil 4: 8). Certainly, a good mind bears good fruits and produces good deeds.