

Homily for The Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time  
(Year A)  
04/10/20

Another Sunday, another parable. If the chief priests and the elders didn't get the message from the parable we heard last Sunday, Jesus will have another go. Although he doesn't get much of a positive reaction from them, he is not going to give up on them and abandon them. His response to their deafness is to tell the story a different way and to try and find a chink in the armour of their self-satisfaction. So, lets have another go. So he tells them another story. Once again the story is constructed to present some attitudes or behaviour that is pretty unappealing, and to shock the people listening into thinking 'Oh my goodness, that's me! What can I do about it.'

In this story, the tenants are given a great gift. They are given a chance to work a vineyard that has been created with great care, with no expense spared. It is a gift of a job, a dream, a chance to run a top of the range facility. But the tenants have a deep-seated arrogance which is going to control what they do. Deep down they say to themselves 'I can do as I please'. I am clever, I am powerful, I am in control, so I can do just as I want. Their approach to the vineyard has shifted: they do not think: 'here is a delightful place, a great opportunity that we can care for and make fruitful for the owner'. Instead they think 'we can do as we please, no one can stop us, we can take this for ourselves and we can make it our own'.

The tenants in the story are models of human arrogance: I can do as I please, and there will be no consequences. In this we see the tragedy of humanity's dealings with one another, with God, with the world that we inhabit: I can do as I please. This has always been the phrase that lies at the root of human moral failure: who are you to tell me what to do? I will do as I please. But our technological world has made the problem worse: I can do as I please, and whatever problems my behaviour causes will be solved by the clever scientists. We come to believe that our actions have no consequences, because someone will always come along and clear up the mess that we make. So we live in a state of perpetual childishness, content to make as much mess as we wish because someone else will clear it up. The tenants in the story feel that they are supreme. They will treat the servants, and even the son, just as they please. They take pleasure in their own power, their own ability to control others. When the servants run away or fall dead, they are delighted, because this just reaffirms their own sense of invincibility: they thought they could do as they pleased, and it seems that they were right. So a sort of arrogance inflation settles in: every time they believe they have got away with doing as they please, they become more daring and more extreme. There are no consequences! Except, one day, there are.

Like all the parables, this one works on many levels. But it is addressed to us to make us think: is there, somewhere inside me, this fatal poison that says, 'I can do just as I please'? Do I believe, in some way, that I am free to do just as I please and there will be no consequences – or that some clever person will come along and clear up the mess that I have made? This strange and unsettling time has the

potential to shake us out of our complacency, and our easy but lazy belief that we can get away with anything. Is that really the way of life we want to go back to? Do we really want to go back to doing just what we want in the hope that someone will be able to cover up for our self-indulgence and clear up the mess we make? The world is at a tipping point. For the whole of its history since industrialization, we have done just as we pleased, using the world as we pleased, knowing that whatever damage we do there is someone, somewhere, clever enough to patch it up. But what if one day there isn't? The progress of the virus has punctured our arrogant belief that we are always in control, because now we know we are not. This knowledge should drive us not to despair, or to pinning our hopes on the pathetic idea that some clever scientist will put it all right; it should drive us to change. It should drive us to a different way of living, that sees the people around us as brothers and sisters, and the world we live in as an awesome gift, created out of love to give us delight, not to be pillaged for passing pleasures.

Five years ago Pope Francis wrote a letter on caring for our common home, much of it based on the life of the saint whose name he took, whose feast day is today. He wrote that for St Francis everything in the world around him was a brother, a sister – not out of naïve romanticism, or sentimentalism, but because that is how human beings find their real place in the world: not as masters free to use it and exploit it, but as one part of a symphony of praise and worship offered by all creation to the God that made it.

*“The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”* Pope Francis Laudato Si n.11

St Francis saw that we cannot do just as we please, either with our world or with one another, or in our relations with God, because our actions always have consequences. This coronavirus time is the perfect time for us to learn the same lesson. Surely we will not be so blind and arrogant as the tenants in today's parable; surely we will not miss this opportunity to see the truth. Will we?