

Reflection for the 27th Sunday of Ordinary time, Cycle A

The lectionary translation of the readings for this Sunday can be found at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/100823.cfm>

1st Reading: *Isaiah 5:1–7*

This song was composed well before the exile. It is in the form of a ballad and scripture scholars believe that Isaiah may have sung it at a vintage festival maybe during the Feast of Tabernacles. Its meaning is clear; God has done everything for his people, yet they are not faithful. The vineyard being torn down and left for ruin alludes to the invasion of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) by Assyria and the consequent exile of many of its inhabitants.

2nd Reading: *Philippians 4:6–9*

We are now pretty close to the end of the Letter to the Philippians. As usual, Paul gives them instructions to live by; in this selection, continue in prayer and focus on the good.

Gospel: *Matthew 21:33–43*

He will... lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times.” Mt 21:41

I knew I wanted to talk about the difference between fruitfulness and productivity this Sunday and it made me think of Pope John XIII. Remember Pope John... he is the one who brought us the Second Vatican Council. He was also given the nickname Johnny Walker because he would sneak out of the Vatican in the evenings and go for a walk without his security guards.

You may remember that the Vatican produced a two-volume set of books listing all the Vatican offices and the personnel who worked in them. Seeing the size of the books, a reporter asked Pope John how many people worked in the Vatican. Without pause, he answered, “Oh, about half.” If they all worked hard, that would be somewhere around 50% productivity.

The point is that many people think fruitfulness and productivity are the same thing. I even found a website that said they were the same thing; they’re not! Productivity is about producing, obviously... about things. A measure of productivity might be how much is produced in a given amount of time.

Fruitfulness is about living things. Fruitfulness is relational. It’s about the effect we have on others. Think about it. The produce section of the grocery might have lots and lots of tomatoes but if they are not ripe, they won’t make a very good pasta sauce. Ultimately, to be fruitful, you have to have grown into what you were created to be.

So, what did Jesus mean when he told the chief priests and the elders that they weren’t being fruitful? He meant they weren’t being life-giving to the people; they weren’t helping the people grow into being the best version of what God created them to be... nice big red, ripe, juicy tomatoes (so to speak). The way they practiced their ministry didn’t have anything to do with life or growth or fruitfulness.

Let's use raising children as an example. We can raise them to be good citizens. We can raise them to be productive members of society. We can raise them to be able to take care of themselves, to earn a good living. We can even raise them so they can make a good enough living to take care of us in our old age. That is all commendable.

We should also concern ourselves with raising our children so they can have good, fruitful relationships. But we can't stop there. If we stop there, so will they. But if we raise our children to be in relationship with the Lord, their growth continues even when they are out of the house and on their own. That is the key; we need to consciously raise our children to be in relationship with the Lord. That is what giving the harvest at the proper time is all about.

I've just used raising children as an example because it is so easy to visualize, but all of our relationships need to be like that. They need to be life-giving and they need to be oriented toward introducing the other to relationship with the Lord. Sometimes we do that by just being a channel of God's love for them and letting God do the work. Sometimes we are in relationship with someone who is already in relationship with the Lord and we are just supporting that.

Maybe this week would be a good time to reflect on our own relationships. Which ones are fruitful for us; help us be alive and grow? Which ones are fruitful for the other, where we help the other be alive and grow? Reflect on that, reflect on this Gospel and give God the produce at the proper time.

Reflection:

Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit. Mt 21:43

Question:

What words or phrases grabbed your attention during the Liturgy of the Word on Sunday? What connection do those words or phrases have to your day-to-day life? (Why do you think they grabbed your attention?) What might God be trying to say to you through these words or phrases? What response should you make? What action should you take?

Alternative:

Reflect upon/Share about a person you know whom you think lives a fruitful life. What is it that makes that person's way of living fruitful rather than just productive? What can you change in your life so that you can become more fruitful?

Verse by Verse:

Mt 21:33 "Hear another parable..." | Our Lectionary adds "Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people," before the start of this verse to let us know to whom Jesus is talking. The identification of his audience is noted in Mt 21:28.

Mt 21:33 "There was a landowner..." | The landowner represents of God.

Mt 21:33 "Then he leased it out to tenants..." | The tenants represent Israel. The lease was probably a share cropping arrangement wherein the tenants raised the grapes and were allowed to keep a percentage for their labors. The major percentage stayed the property of the landowner. (UBSH)

Mt 21:34 "...he sent his servants" | The servants represent the pre-exilic prophets (Those before the Babylonian exile). (UBSH)

Mt 21:36 "...he sent other servants..." | These other servants represent the post-exilic prophets. (USBH)

Mt 21:37 "...he sent his son..." | His son represents Jesus. (JBC)

Mt 21:38 "...let us kill him and acquire his inheritance." | There was a law which allowed, under some circumstances, that ownerless property could become the property of those who immediately claimed it. (UBSH)

Mt 21:39 "...threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." | This is reverse order from Mk and Lk. Possible Matthew is referring to the fact that Jesus was taken out of Jerusalem for his crucifixion. (UBSH)

Mt 21:43 "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." | The JBC says that this verse can only be taken to refer to admission of Gentiles to the Church.

Mt 21:43 "...the kingdom of God will be taken away from you..." | The kingdom of God here is his kingdom on earth, the messianic kingdom.

Mt 21:43 "...and given to a people that will produce its fruit." | The people who will produce its fruit is the Church, possibly the Gentile Christians if JBC is right.