



Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 14 August 2022

READINGS

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29—12:2; Luke 12:49-56

The Signs of the Times

Greetings Friends. The image of Jesus in this Sunday's Gospel does not gel with our stereotypical views of Jesus. It is, for example, difficult to reconcile last week's Gospel reading, which opens with "Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32) with this week's fire-wielding Jesus who comes not to bring peace but division.

The most obvious explanation for these two radically different messages is that they addressed different audiences and, if we are to hazard a guess, we might say that the content of last week's Gospel was directed at Jesus' disciples (with the mention of the giving of the Father's kingdom and the commandment to sell one's possessions), while in today's Gospel, Jesus refers to his addressees as hypocrites (a term he usually reserves for the Scribes and Pharisees).

Whoever he is addressing, he rebukes them for failing to interpret the present time or age (Luke 12:56). In Matthew's version Jesus uses the phrase "signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3). The words for both "sign" and "time" are significant. The Gk. semeia (for sign) can mean miracle, as it does in Matthew's version. The writer of John's Gospel was said in fact to have used a "book of signs" as one of his sources, on account of the seven (depending on what one classifies as a sign) signs or miracles Jesus performs in the Gospel.

The Greek word for "time" used here is not the conventional chronos, which indicates linear time, but kairos, which can mean "moment" or "opportunity." Alternately, it can mean "season" or "at the proper time". The phrase "signs of the times," based on the passage, was used by the writers of the now-famous Kairos document, to refer to our ability to interpret or discern God's will in the world, particularly in situations of injustice and oppression where matters had reached a head. This equates to prophetic action or insight in that it involves a discernment of future outcomes for such situations.

All of this is significant when read in conjunction with the Isaiah reading set for this Sunday. We see clear parallels between this "parable of the unfruitful vineyard" in the Isaiah reading and the so-called "parable of the wicked tenants" in the Synoptic Gospels. In both parables, the vineyard is planted, a winepress dug, and a watchtower built. Both parables are also addressed to the wealthy, landowning elite, residing in Jerusalem, even though the parables are separated by at least 500 years.

Interestingly, if one reads just a verse further (Isaiah 5:8), we see a reference to the widespread socio-economic phenomenon of latifundialisation, a process whereby landowning elite residing in urban centres amassed for themselves larger and larger tracts of land through a system of land-indebtedness – peasant landholders had to pledge their land as surety for loans and had the land confiscated when they defaulted. This system, and the underlying greed of the wealthy, led to widescale dissention which culminated in the revolt that was the first Jewish War of 66-70 AD. One of the first measures taken by the rebels on reaching Jerusalem, according to Josephus, was to burn public debt records housed in the temple. The unrest led to Roman intervention and eventually to the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple in particular, something Jesus had prophesied 40 years prior.

Jesus' rebuke of the Jewish leaders in today's Gospel, at not being able to interpret the present age, as well as his invocation of Isaiah 5 in his re-telling of the parable of the vineyard, conveys his lament at the failure of the ruling elite to care properly for the people in their charge. Indeed, they do the opposite. They exploit the people in their care, pushing them to the brink of destitution. There is an implicit judgement on such action within both the Isaiah passage and Jesus' version of the parable. It is after all God's vineyard, not that of the landholding elite. And because of the latter's gross mismanagement of it, the vineyard will be taken from them and given to others.

May this therefore be a reminder to leaders in our own day to govern, not from their own self-interest, but on behalf of their constituencies and, may we too be reminded of our role in caring for those less fortunate than ourselves and of the need for holding the leadership of our communities accountable.

Amen