

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ben Frie SJ

Who doesn't enjoy a glass of wine, and preferably from France. But the ample choice we have at the off-license has no limits: wine is imported from all over the world. Sometimes the news makes us stop and think about the price of these delicacies. Not the price in the shop, but the struggle in the vineyards. Everything is done to maximize production, with pesticides if necessary: every square meter has to generate more to be profitable.

Nevertheless, we like to cherish the idyllic image of the vineyard: sun-drenched, ripe bunches, big harvests. The many things that grow and blossom before us, that we can and may enjoy. It is our dreams that sustain such images, dreams of success in everything we plant, dreams of our children doing well, dreams of a city where life is good. Add to that dreams of a church that runs well, is successful - quite apart from the mischief called abuse. Isaiah uses that idyllic image of the eye-watering vineyard to attract his listeners, but it soon becomes clear that he wants to make something else clear to them along those lines, something not so idyllic. There is social injustice in Israel, and he illustrates it with word games: there is *mispach*, injustice, instead of *misjpat*, justice. There is *tse'aqa*, wailing, instead of *tsedaqa*, justice. Several times in Scripture, the disappointing vineyard is the symbol of Israel forcing the vineyard's owner, God himself, to intervene.

Jesus does the same: he uses the image of the vineyard, but tells of evil tenants: the Jewish leaders, who produced no fruit, indeed, they resisted God. The mistreated servants in the vineyard are the rejected prophets; the son, the only heir, is Jesus. Mark sees in the son's fate the rejection and later exaltation of the Messiah. He tells how the son is killed and then cast out. The anger of the tenants manifests itself in that they do not bury the corpse. In the later version of Matthew and Luke, the son is first thrown outside the vineyard and only then killed. This creates an allegorical allusion to Jesus' death on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. The listeners must surely have understood it that way.

Jesus asks for an examination of conscience, including from us. The vineyard today is 'our common home', as it is called in *Laudato si*. The creation entrusted to us, but equally a safe place to live that is due to all of us but is so few and far between, living in peace thanks to equal distribution, without jealousy, without desolation and selfishness. It doesn't seem possible: violence from predatory gangs is re-emerging, uncontrolled youth, tragic shootings. What are we doing?

Many are becoming alienated in our days: we are uncertain, unsure where things are going. Yet that does not change the vision God has with people. He keeps alive our dreams of the outcome of our actions, our dreams of our children, of a fruitful future, a fine city to live in, a well-run church. Isaiah and Matthew encourage us to keep trusting and not lose intimacy with God. Well, the vineyard has been entrusted to us. Don't destroy it. Bring it to fruition. Keep believing in it.