

SERMON ON THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

Today's Gospel reading from the Gospel of Matthew is the parable of the vineyard. We are all familiar with this parable, no doubt, as well as the interpretation which is generally given about it from earliest times. St John Chrysostom speaks of this parable at length in his sermons on the Gospel of Matthew, and it is his interpretation which most of us already know, and which may seem obvious to us. In general, the interpretation which most of the early Church Fathers gives is as follows:

The owner of the vineyard is God, the Father. The vineyard itself is Israel (or sometimes, the world). The workers in the vineyard are the people of Israel, who were prepared from the beginning of time, after the fall of Adam, to work there. In fact, God had already done all the work: the vines were planted, a hedge was put around the vineyard to protect it, a winepress was prepared, and a tower was built in the center of the vineyard. There was very little to do except to be faithful.

Early Christian commentaries identify the hedge around the vineyard either as the Law of Moses (which to this day is still referred to by Jews as a "hedge" which protects the faithful); or as angels who were sent to guard over the people of Israel. The winepress was understood as the receptacle in the heart for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The tower was taken to be Christ, who even before the Incarnation was present for Israel to watch over them; although some of the Fathers understood the tower to be Jerusalem. And of course those who were sent by the master of the vineyard to instruct the people and to call them to repentance, were the many prophets who were sent to Israel over the centuries. As we know, most of these prophets were rejected or killed one by one. Then the owner sent his own son, who is the Incarnate Christ, who was taken outside the gate and murdered. Chrysostom notes that this is exactly prophetic of the fact that Jesus was crucified outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

If we are satisfied that this is the whole meaning of the parable of the vineyard for us today, however, we will have missed the point altogether. The Church Fathers understood that the vineyard of Israel was now the vineyard of the Church. When Jesus said that other workers would be called to replace those who were thrown out and punished, he meant the Apostles and in particular, the Gentiles—although, says Chrysostom, the Lord did not name the Gentiles specifically, or the Jews would have found a pretext to crucify him even sooner.

Now if this is the case, then the vineyard is no longer understood as given over to Israel, but to us. The vineyard itself is the Church. Christ is the tower in the center of it, as the Fathers say. And you and I, then, are the workers who are to take good care of the vine so that it produces fruit.

What is the fruit? It is, as we know, the fruit of the Spirit. We are to care for our lives and the lives of the others so that we, and those in our care, are fruitful. We are to do the works that befit repentance, and produce the fruit of the Spirit which, as we know, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). And we see that there is only one fruit, with all of these qualities; there are not many different kinds of fruits. This one fruit of the Spirit is transformation of the fallen human being into the likeness of Christ: just as grapes become wine, we are to become enlightened, illumined, and glorified. This is the opening of the *νοῦς* (Nous, or heart) to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, producing constant prayer in the heart.

But have we in fact taken good care of the vineyard? By "we," I mean the Church through all time since Pentecost. Here, I would include for a moment all the people who identify as Christians around the world. We know, however, that in fact from the very beginning, there has been division among those who identify as the Church. St. Paul writes to the churches in his

care to admonish them for their arguing, for their sin, and for their failure to carry out the instructions which he had given them. And then, as we know, there were major splits over the centuries away from the Church, which evidently began during the time of St John the Evangelist, who writes about it in his second and third letters. After the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon there was the formation of the Oriental Orthodox churches; then there was the Great Schism dividing the Latin West from the East; and then came the Protestant Reformation, which soon led to a complete fracturing of the Christian world. As you may know, today there are more than 40,000 different “Christian denominations” in the world, not to mention other outright heretical sects and cults which pretend to be Christian but which are not.

We should be careful here to note that the Tradition of the Church itself has not changed since the it was handed down by the Apostles, but that in every generation there have been people who departed from this Tradition. It is no wonder, then, that many people of the world look at the Vineyard of Christ and see, not beautiful grapes that have been lovingly tended, but weeds, and barenness, arguing, various factions, and hypocrisy. We could say that these departures from the Way of Christ are proliferating in our time and seem to have no end. For this reason, today many people who were formerly a part of the Body of Christ have gone completely outside the hedges that mark the boundaries of the Church, and many more refuse to come in from outside. And why should they?

But there is more. If we Orthodox are comfortable in the idea that somehow, all this division is not really our responsibility—after all, we claim to be the True Church in the world—we only need to look at the discord which plagues Orthodoxy even today. Personally, I think that we cannot escape judgment for this, because we are called to be the keepers of the vineyard. Today, in the midst of so much chaos and sickness in the world, we are the ones who are responsible for taking care of the vine and for harvesting the fruit. Orthodoxy is the only actual Christianity which is left standing, and which has the responsibility to care for the vineyard of Christ.

Our responsibility as Orthodox Christians, then, is to prune, feed, water, and care for the unbelieving world as much as we are able, and in particular, for those who have been sent to us. We are called to be the witnesses to the Truth which would draw others into the vineyard, in order to receive the healing of soul and body which Christ offers in the sacraments and in the spiritual teachings of the Church. But have we done that? Or have we turned inward on ourselves, ignoring the spiritual teaching of the Fathers of the Church? Have we substituted ethnic culture, church income, counting the number of members rather than the quality of discipleship, expensive buildings, and the like, for the works of the Holy Spirit? Are we actually teaching people how practically to receive the Holy Spirit and to bear the fruits of repentance? And to pray constantly in the heart?

Many people today want desperately to turn to God for help. But where will they find faith in all the earth? In fact, the largest single religious identity in America today among the youth is what is called “Nones,” that is, no religion at all. We may think that America is somehow still predominantly Christian, or at least still some kind of Protestant Christian. But what used to be called the “mainline” Protestant churches in America and around the western world, are disappearing rapidly. Today they have become “sideline” churches. They have openly abandoned faith in the risen Christ; they deny the Holy Spirit; they embrace all kinds of vile behavior and false teachings.

Modern churches (and here I do not mean only Protestant churches) have replaced faith in Christ with faith in social engineering and a new kind of social morality which has nothing to do with healing of the soul. Because of this, young people today have rightly observed that if all the Church means is social engineering, it is not necessary to believe in God at all. Political parties do not require any kind of faith in God. More and more people are turning not only to

political solutions, which cannot heal the soul, but to destructive and godless philosophies. Besides, when they read news about Roman Catholic churches they see the godless abuse of children; and when they read about so-called conservative Protestants, they read in the news about adultery, theft, and greed for wealth and power.

Can we say that this situation is that the fault of the Church? Yes, we can. I propose that in fact Orthodoxy has been sent prophets from the beginning, from the time of Pentecost, but we have failed to heed them. Here I am going to refer to the observations of an Orthodox spiritual teacher of our time, Proto-presbyter John Romanides of blessed memory, who gave this warning: We know from all the prophets, both in the Old Testament and in the New, that salvation is a matter of being changed into the likeness of Christ. The Bible refers to this as “glorification.” In the Old Testament, many experienced glorification even before the Incarnation of the Son of God. Moses and Elijah were glorified, for instance, as seen by Peter, James and John on the mountain of the Transfiguration. Then we see in the New Testament that the disciples experienced illumination in their walk with Jesus, and glorification at Pentecost. St. Paul, who calls himself the “last of all,” received this glorification on the road to Damascus. These Apostles saw and experienced the uncreated light of God, and passed on their experience to those who followed them.

In Apostolic teaching, the practical experience of illumination follows repentance; and as we seek the Holy Spirit, the experience of glorification follows through prayer and the life of the Spirit. This was well known by all the early apostles and prophets, as St Paul teaches, and is what the New Testament means by “salvation,” that is, healing of the human soul and our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Of course this experience was not limited to the very first Christians, but has persisted in the Church until our own time. These many glorified saints are the prophets of the Christian era. We can name them as they have appeared through the history of the Church and are celebrated Sunday by Sunday: saints such as John Chrysostom, Symeon the New Theologian, Maximus the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, the holy women martyrs, and many others; or closer to our own time, Seraphim of Sarov, Silouan of Athos, or Herman of Alaska; or in our own lifetime, Joseph the Hesychast, Sophrony of Essex, Paisios the New of the Holy Mountain, a number of Matushkas and Presvyteras and nuns, and many, many others. These are the saints whom we name and celebrate at every Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church around the world.

Now these saints teach about acquiring the Holy Spirit and cultivating the continual prayer of the heart. It is this interior and constant prayer which changes and illumines, by the grace of and energetic gift of God. Through acquiring noetic prayer, we are able to be at peace in the midst of chaos or even the threat of death, because we have already acquired eternal life within us. We become participants in the Kingdom of God.

But what has happened to the teaching of the great Hesychasts? These are the saints who teach the way of interior prayer, of interior peace and quiet; of living without the passions which disturb the world. The word “hesychast” derives from Greek ἡσυχία (hesychía), meaning “quiet” or “peacefulness.” Those who learn to practice constant prayer, called Prayer of the Heart, are practicing hesychasm. In the beginning of the Church, as we know from reading history, this way of life and way of prayer was taught everywhere by the bishops and presbyters of the Church. But today, hesychasm is regarded by theologians, even in the Orthodox Church, as an addition to Orthodox faith, or a small and insignificant movement within Orthodoxy. It is even characterized as a sort of copy of Buddhist “mindfulness.” It is no longer taught in our churches, and it seems no wonder that the whole western world now has gone after so-called “mindfulness meditation” as a way to reduce stress—leaving out prayer altogether, and abandoning the Church.

We can say, then, that instead of listening to these saints and learning their way of prayer and life, we have substituted book-reading and rational speculation about God, rather than

teaching how to experience God and practice constant divine awareness in our lives. We have created institutes of learning, that is, the modern seminaries, which teach theology as it has been practiced in the West at least from the time of Augustine of Hippo, certainly through the Middle Ages, but not in Orthodoxy! By that I mean that our schools teach speculative theology, a kind of philosophy, which is grounded in classic Greek and Latin philosophical ideas, rather than in the practical experience of enlightenment through prayer in the Holy Spirit. This is true not only in America, but even in Greece, as Fr. Romanides pointed out many times during his career.

Recently I read comments by supposedly Orthodox theologians, who were speculating about whether God can be ecstatic. In other words, did God somehow step outside of the divine nature in the Incarnation? Did God cease to be the eternal God in the Incarnation? This idea is actually based on the writings of certain German Lutheran theologians who, over the last two hundred years, speculated that when Christ “emptied himself” to be born in the likeness of mankind (Philippians 2:7), he ceased to be God. This idea is what is called “Lutheran kenotic theology.” This is, of course, not the Christian faith; it is not what we say in the Creed at every Liturgy.

Orthodoxy teaches that the Son of God became man without alteration or change; he was fully God and fully man, a mystery which we cannot grasp but which formed the heart of all Christian faith. But now we have Orthodox professors saying not only that God changed in the Incarnation, but that God continues to change as the world changes. This last idea is called “Process theology,” which is based on the philosophical views of writers like Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. In fact, when I was a young student at the University of Texas, the professor who was most renowned for developing Process Theology, Charles Hartshorne, was still on the campus as an emeritus professor. He was by all accounts a wonderful man, and died in 2000 at nearly ninety years old. His theological perspective, which rediscovered the works of Anselm for the scholarly world, was meant to assert that God is always active in the world and that God is constantly in the process of *becoming*. But becoming what? This is of course not a Christian perspective; it is based on rational concepts, as a kind of philosophy, but is also due to a misreading of Philippians 2.

Some Protestant theologians (and now, Roman Catholic teachers) thought that in his Letter to the Philippians, St Paul is saying that Christ “emptied himself” (Greek, *ekenosen*) of the divine nature, and was therefore able to be active in the world. In fact, the Greek does not imply emptiness, but rather that the Son of God “poured himself out” (the real meaning of the Greek word). In other words, the eternal God poured himself into human nature, filling it and transforming it. But this is not what is taught today in seminaries around the world.

I no doubt do not need to tell you that this idea, that God changes to fit our own changing and developing world, is not the Christian faith. Orthodoxy says that God is unchanging, but at the same time is constantly dynamic. The mystery of the Trinity cannot be understood, but has been revealed to us as constant communion among the Persons of the Trinity: what the Fathers called *perichoresis*, that is, a constant “running the circle.” This word was first used to mean that Christ, the Son of God, was in His person both fully God and fully man; the divine nature penetrated human nature without change, constantly moving together in the one divine incarnate Son. Later, the Church Fathers used this word to indicate the relationship of the Persons of the Holy Trinity to one another: that the Persons of the Trinity are always in motion, but without any change. The dynamism of God does not require God to go outside of Himself, so to speak, but we can experience the energies of God which are shared with those who wish to receive him. This is what is called “illumination” and eventually, “glorification” as we are fully immersed in the uncreated light of God. God, of course, cannot be understood; but we are able to receive the energetic work of God, because this is the entire purpose of human nature: to be filled with God.

The experience of knowing and receiving the mysterious and dynamic energy of God, through the Holy Spirit, is exactly what is described by the saints. It is the tradition which was acquired by them and passed along to our own time. But we have forgotten about this almost completely, preferring instead to be armchair theologians or philosophers, who do not know how to tend the vineyard, that is, how to heal the lost and suffering souls of mankind in our time.

Fr. Romanides characterized his experience of watching Orthodox priests as something like going to doctors who are quacks, who do not actually have any idea how to heal. Suppose, he said, that you had a pain in your side, and thought you might have appendicitis. Then you go to the doctor who assures you that he knows all about that situation. He puts you in the operating room, puts on his mask, apron and gloves, and comes beside the operating table. Then he begins to read to you from a medical book all about the appendix. "There," he says. "Now you know about appendicitis. You can go home now."

You object, of course, that you still have the diseased appendix and are in terrible pain. "Maybe I will die!" you shout. But the doctor reassures you, "Never mind. If you die, you will be happier in the next life." So it is today among us priests in our own Orthodox Church.

Priests and, I dare say, hierarchs, can take on the role of spiritual doctors without knowing how to heal. They themselves are not illumined. They are not glorified. They do not know how to pray, really, although of course they do pray. They may not even believe in healing at all, whether for soul or body. And so, they read prayers over us—we Orthodox have many prayers, for just about any situation—and then, if we say that we might die, they assure us that we will be happier in the next life. After that they go back to the real concerns of the parish or the diocese or Metropolis: raising money, figuring out how to pay for the priest and the Archdiocese and the expensive buildings, how to cope with constantly complaining church members, and so on.

I am saying all this today to carry out my role as a worker in the vineyard along with yourselves, because on this I will be judged as a priest. But let me say also that in fact you are doing the right things on the road to spiritual healing and illumination in the Holy Spirit. You are here, at the Divine Liturgy. You have repented of your sins. You are ready to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, which cleanses from all sin. Now our responsibility is to prune the vine, beginning with ourselves: to cut away everything that is irrelevant and which distracts us from bearing the fruit of the Spirit. We must learn to lose the passions which are destroying our nation. We must learn to practice keeping the peace of God, which is supernatural, even in the face of disturbing news of all kinds, because these things are outside the hedge of our vineyard. We must stop reading philosophy and speculation and theories of all kinds, no matter how interested we are in these things, and we must seek constant prayer. And by the way, the modern word "theory" is derived from Greek *theoria*, which means to *see*: to have the vision of Christ which occurs in glorification. It does not mean an idea that we put forward ourselves, but something supernatural which comes from God.

Now you and I cannot go out and fix the world; it is God who heals, not ourselves, and this healing is with persons one at a time, who enter into His glory. Our task is to seek that glory through earnest repentance, constant prayer to receive the Holy Spirit, and communing with the Saints at the Holy Eucharist. We are learning to fast and to do without, if need be; to go where the Lord sends us; to stand firm on the Rock of our salvation, and to practice the life which the saints of the Church have communicated to us through all the centuries.

Then when we meet those who wish to come into the Vineyard, the Orthodox Church, they see the glory of Jesus Christ in us, and they desire it. Looking around, they see the fruit of the Spirit in our midst. They see that we are responsible citizens who are not swayed by every wind of doctrine, or news on the television, or speculation about the future or about God; but

who are steady and constant in our faithfulness to the God who does not change, but who never ceases to care for us.

Now may the grace of the Holy Trinity bless and keep you all, unto eternal life. +Fr
Brendan