

We have been hearing from various prophets in the past weeks and this time it is Isaiah. The opening chapters, leading up to what we hear today, present a scathing indictment of Jerusalem's corruption, exploitation of the poor, idol worship, flagrant hubris, and the denigration of the land itself.

Isaiah, along with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, relies on the metaphor of the vineyard to serve as a mirror to those against whom he prophesies. The passage we hear today makes it clear that this vineyard, planted by the Lord of hosts, protected and tended with great care, is, in fact, Judah, God's pleasant planting, from whom God "expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry."

This prophetic vision of Isaiah also makes clear the divine consequences of these failings: Jerusalem will fall, and God's chosen shall be carried off as captives into exile. This is the same exile Jeremiah and Ezekiel both experienced at the hands of the Assyrian Empire and then prophesied.

If you have studied the Old Testament, you will know there is a pattern that repeats over and over again. Israel sins against God. God punishes them, but then God sends a prophet (or a judge) to set them straight. They repent and return to the Lord and the sentence is lifted. Until they, once again, fall into sinful behavior.

And what is that sinful behavior? It is the failure to do that which Micah, in verse 6:8 lays out. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." The people have acted unjustly. Those in power have prevented the community as a whole from flourishing, despite God's ongoing and attentive care. And so, there will be consequences. In the Old Testament this would be understood as divine punishment. Today we might think the consequences are the natural result of poor choices and a failure to act ethically. What is happening with our environment might be a clear example for us today.

Isaiah evokes the metaphor of the vineyard as God's sacred garden. Jesus would have known Isaiah well, as would the chief priests and scribes of the Temple. And Matthew, written after 70AD, would have lived through the second destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus' parable again uses the image of the vineyard, planted and protected. The landowner has left others in charge with the expectation that they will oversee its operation. When it was ready for harvest the landowner first send his slaves to collect its produce – but they were violently driven off. He tries a second time but met the same result. Finally, the landowner sends his son expecting nothing less than their respect. Instead, he is put to death.

Understanding the pattern found in the Old Testament, it seems the slaves represented the judges and prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and finally John the Baptist, while the son is Jesus and the landowner is God. While not all parables are allegories, this one clearly is.

Jesus ends the parable with the promise of a miserable death and transferring of responsibility for the harvest to others who will be faithful to God's purpose.

Jesus then addresses the scribes and Pharisees with another image they would clearly understand when he says, “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” In the Hebrew bible the cornerstone was the prophetic image for the coming of the messiah. Here, the temple authorities are rejecting Jesus and Jesus responds, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.”

Once again, there will be consequences for those who fail in their leadership. In this case, the scribes and Pharisees who care more about wielding their own power and authority to enrich themselves, than in caring for the people God has entrusted to their care.

They are not stupid. They know what happened to the Israelites in Isaiah’s day. So, to avoid the inevitable consequences of their actions and inaction, they begin to plot the death of the son, fully leaning into the very parable Jesus used against them, maybe in the hope that they would somehow amend their ways. Repent and return to the Lord.

Paul’s letters are almost always written in response to a dispute. At the heart of his letter to the Philippians is the question “how does one become a part of this fledgling community of The Way, followers of the resurrected Jesus?”

From ancient times to be Jewish meant to be circumcised. Jews who chose to follow Jesus already were. But gentiles were not. Did the gentiles first need to be circumcised before they could become followers of The Way? Some thought so. Paul says no. Instead, then and now, we become Christian through baptism and we make important promises along the way. I often tell parents of infants and young children, that I don’t want them making these promises for their children with their fingers crossed behind their backs. Baptism is a covenant we enter into with God and what we promise matters. And we see, time and time again in scripture, the consequences of our failure.

The Israelites, often chose the ways of the world over the ways of God. The scribes and Pharisees chose to enrich themselves at the expense of those they were meant to serve, even to the point of condemning Jesus to death on the cross. We claim to follow Jesus, but do we, or do we, through a myriad of poor choices, condemn him, over and over again, to death?

Every choice we make should be aligned with the values and ethics contained in our baptismal promises. Each and every one of them must be aligned with God’s kingdom, even if it means rejecting the ways of the world.

It is almost time to vote. Each choice we make will have consequences. Each must be aligned with our Christian values, with the kingdom of God, life in the world for which we were created in the image of God. We must vote for justice, peace, love of our neighbor, kindness, compassion and care, life in the vineyard, life in the kingdom of God. Because, when we claim to follow Jesus there is a moral imperative in that claim. Otherwise, saying we are Christian means nothing.