

## Sunday between August 14 and 20 inclusive

Proper 15, Ordinary/Lectionary 20

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

## Isaiah 5:1-7

NRSV

This is a poem composed during the reign of King Jotham (750-734 BC). In form it is a popular ballad; perhaps it was sung at the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), the fall thanksgiving festival. Starting on a happy note, the hard truth appears in v. 7: it is a parable.

The farmer prepares the vineyard with care. Perhaps he piles the "stones" (v. 2) into terrace walls ("hedge", v. 5) to permit more intensive cultivation. He uses the "watchtower" (v. 2) to warn him of wild animals which might *trample down* (v. 5) the vines. The vines are "choice" (v. 2), the best available. The Hebrew rendered "wild" means *stinks!* As does any good parable, this one invites the hearers to judge the *actors* (see vv. 3-4): "my beloved" (v. 1) did right, so the fault must lie with the vineyard. In v. 6, we learn who speaks: God "command[s] the clouds". The destruction of the vineyard foreshadows his judgement: disaster will come on Judah and God will withdraw his support of the people. (Even so, as any Palestinian knows, hard work and the return of rain in a future year can make the vineyard productive again.) V. 7 identifies the *actors* in the parable: the farmer stands for "the Lord of hosts", the vineyard for Judah ("the house of Israel") and the grapes for "the people of Judah": they are his "pleasant planting" for he was pleased to covenant with them. The end of v. 7 involves *word play* in Hebrew, on pairs of words that sound alike but have very different meanings: "justice" – "bloodshed" and "righteousness" – "cry". "Justice" here is what God expects people to do – to God, fellow humans and themselves; "righteousness" is the ethical behaviour resulting from so doing, especially in helping the poor. The "cry" is from a poor person, perhaps robbed of his goods through unjust judgement.

## Psalm 80:1-2,8-19

NRSV

Vv. 1-3 are a cry for help. Please God ("Shepherd of Israel"), you who lead the Israelite ("Joseph") people ("flock"), come to our military aid ("stir up your might", v. 2). (Joseph's sons were Ephraim and Manasseh; the tribal areas "Ephraim ... Manasseh" were in the northern kingdom, so this psalm comes from there. God was thought of as seated on the "cherubim" (v. 1), the half-human, half-animal figures on the Ark.) Vv. 3, 7 & 19 are a refrain: please take us back, God, into the covenant relationship with you. The nation's current plight is seen as due to God's anger. In vv. 8-13, the Exodus is likened to a vine; the vineyard is the Promised Land. God's creative acts ("mountains", "cedars", v. 10) stretch from the Mediterranean "sea" (v. 11) to the Euphrates "River". Why God, ask vv. 12-13, have you acted though our enemy, letting him occupy our land and lay waste to it? Please God, deliver us (v. 14); care for your people ("have regard for this vine"). May you destroy our enemy (v. 16b). Help our king ("the one at your

right hand", v. 17) whom you once "made strong". When you help him, we will be faithful to you for ever; we will come to know you intimately ("call on your name", v. 18). Show us your love ("let your face shine", v. 19).

## Hebrews 11:29-12:2

NRSV

The author has given examples of figures mentioned in Genesis and Exodus who lacked the promise of eternal life with Christ yet acted on faith in God; they acted "by faith" in doing God's will. Now he tells of others who relied on God's promise for the future. The author gives as examples of such actions the crossing of the "Red Sea", the fall of "Jericho" (11:30) and Rahab hiding the Israelite spies – sent to scout out Jericho's defences. (The people of this city were "disobedient", 11:31, to God's will.) In 11:32, several *judges*, a king and a prophet are named as examples. (For "obtained promises", 11:33, the Revised English Bible has *saw God's promises fulfilled*.) Daniel "shut the mouths of lions" so they did not eat him. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had faith that God would save them from a fiery death. (For "won strength out of weakness", 11:34, the Revised English Bible has *their weakness was turned to strength*.) Elijah was God's instrument in returning the widow's son to life (11:35a).

The sufferings in 11:35b-38 are mostly those endured by faithful Israelites before and during the Maccabean revolt in the mid 100s BC; in some cases it is not known to whom the author refers. The world was not worthy of these exemplars of faith! (11:38a). For all of them (11:39), though God found their actions pleasing ("commended ..."), fulfilment of his promise did not occur at the time; rather it was delayed until the saving work of Christ was completed, i.e. in also saving us ("not, apart from us", 11:40). So being "surrounded" (12:1) by all these exemplars of faith ("witnesses" to the efficacy of faith in God), let us "lay aside" anything that may hinder us in living a godly life ("the race"): in it, we look to Jesus as both forerunner ("pioneer", 12:2) and *fulfiller* of our faith. He, we, and those who have gone before us *run the race* to attain eternal life ("joy") and oneness with God – through suffering and shame.

## Luke 12:49-56

NRSV

Luke presents several sayings of Jesus. V. 49 is one saying. "Fire" here is a symbol of purification and separation of the godly from the ungodly. (Gold was separated from the host rock in a fire that had been "kindled".) He wishes that he was called on to exercise judgement now. In Mark 10:38, Jesus says to James and John: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" This is the sense of "baptism" in v. 50: Jesus is under great "stress" until his "baptism" is completed in suffering death and being raised again. Vv. 51-53 are another saying. After the word "peace", it helps understanding to add *at any cost*. Micah used notions like those in vv. 52-53 to tell of the total corruption of the people. Jesus has come for *division* between godly and ungodly people. Vv. 54-56 present yet another saying. The "crowds" are able to "interpret" (v. 56) signs of impending weather, but they, in spite of seeing signs in the "present time", fail to see their implications for the end of the era.