

**27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 5, 2008**

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Earlier in the week I realized how uncomfortable I was going to feel today singing in lovely tones: “The Gospel of the Lord” after proclaiming today’s reading from Matthew. Of course it could be worse. Immediately after proclaiming the doom and destruction of God’s vineyard and the wretched death of the tenants of God’s vineyard, I could have been asked to sing: “This is the Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Good News? Not if you have been listening carefully. In fact, today’s gospel passage can be very misleading when taken as a stand-alone passage. Sometimes, the gospel can be very complex, and even misleading.

A few years ago, the retired Anglican bishop of Newark, New Jersey, John Shelby Spong wrote a book called *The Sins of Scripture* in which he tried to expose some of the more potentially damaging passages in the Bible when those passages are either preached without a careful explanation or preached without their proper context. Bishop Spong loves to provoke controversy; he is not shy at all. The subtitle of his book is more blunt: *Exposing the Bible’s Tales of Hate in Order to Reveal the Love of God*.

But he is not alone among recent commentators who have become more

sensitive to providing careful explanations of what people actually hear each Sunday in church. Peter Gomes, the Harvard professor and chaplain, just last year published his thesis along the same lines. He titled his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's so Good about the Good News?* In it he says bluntly “an ignorant people and a reticent pulpit are the recipe for theological and biblical disaster” (p. 15). Today’s gospel is clearly one of those passages that needs careful explanation.

I suppose there s something appropriate that we read this gospel on the eve of the 12th Ordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome. Some 300 people, scholars and bishops, will meet for three weeks to address “The Word of God in the Life and Ministry of the Church.”

Matthew has Jesus describe his story as a parable, but it is really much more of an allegory than the kind of typical, puzzling and probing parable commonly used by Jesus elsewhere. Everyone and everything has a clear symbolic meaning. As Dan Harrington explained in *America* magazine: “the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel as God’s special people, the tenants are the religious and political leaders of Israel, the harvest is the fullness of God’s kingdom,... the servants...are the prophets, and the landowner’s son is Jesus.” It is all very neat and is crystal clear to Matthew’s audience. This is a

story about the wickedness of Israel's leadership and their replacement in a new Covenant of faith.

Matthew has in mind, no doubt, the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the on-going hostility between the synagogue Jews and the new Christian communities. Matthew also had in mind Isaiah's similar depiction of God's vineyard that we heard in today's first reading. Isaiah laments the impending attack of the Assyrian army on Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C. And Psalm 80, sung so beautifully today uses the same images but now drawn from a sixth century B.C. lament about the state of God's vineyard at that time. But despite the doom and gloom in all three images and readings today, God's vineyard is, in the end, saved. God does not abandon Israel. And we hear the promise that God will *never* abandon God's vineyard.

In short, Matthew is saying simply that there are new tenants in the vineyard. There is a new leadership to follow. Whether Jesus ever said this of himself is hard to know. But certainly the image of Jesus in this story is not among the warm, fuzzy, and consoling stories in the gospels. This is not a picture of Jesus the healer, but of Jesus the scandalous and fiery prophet of old. This is a Jesus who deftly draws upon the psalms and prophets of old to condemn his contemporaries. (Jesus is the "new" prophet, as Matthew's

whole gospel is at pains to draw: the new Moses, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah rolled into one.)

But in any case this is a very hard saying and a stern condemnation of the religious and political leadership in his own time. This story can remain a chastening warning for those of us who share leadership in today's religious and political worlds, but in its original context it is really quite unique.

We Christians today, centuries later, know we proclaim that the vineyard owner's son, vicariously scape-goated and killed by and for us, is, in fact, still alive and still tending the vineyard. The full version of Matthew's gospel knows He is *Emmanuel*, God still with us, and he promises at the very end of Matthew's gospel, to remain with us "until the end of the ages" (Matt. 28).

So what we heard in today's short gospel passage is, indeed, the Gospel of the Lord. But it is not the whole gospel. In order for me to be able to sing to you that this is, indeed, Good News, we all have to first sing with St. Paul today: "Have no anxiety...with thanksgiving make your requests known to God....that the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

The vineyard still grows. The vineyard still awaits our labor. That

much is, indeed, Good News!