

ISAIAH CHAPTER 5

Isaiah 5:1-30

Our reading today is one of the greatest pieces of prophetic literature in the Bible. Here, Isaiah makes clear the difference between what the nation of Judah was called to be and what it actually was. As we look at chapter 5 of Isaiah together this morning, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you might want to open your Bibles at page [***] so that we can follow this together.

Verses 1-7 set the stage for this chapter. The prophet sings a song which is a kind of parable about a vineyard which doesn't produce good grapes, in spite of all the attention which its owner has lavished on it. Israel is being compared to this vineyard. A vine or a vineyard is often used in the Bible as a symbol of Israel – look for example at the parable Jesus told about a vineyard recorded by Matthew (Matthew 21:33-41). In some ways this story is similar to the story the prophet Nathan told to King David to make David condemn his own actions in taking Bathsheba and murdering her husband. Here Isaiah is saying that God has cared for Israel like a vineyard and yet the fruits of their lives are bitter and sour. So, isn't God justified in removing his protection from them.

Verses 1 and 2 tell us that the vineyard, Israel, had many advantages. It belonged to a loving God, it was well chosen and every care had been lavished on it. It was planted with the choicest vines on a very fruitful hill on ground which had been dug and from which all the stones had been cleared. Usually these stones were piled around the perimeter of the vineyard to build a protective wall. Now a vineyard takes a number of years to produce a good crop of grapes and the owner has waited expectantly, yet in the end it yielded bad fruit. The grapes were worthless. During the waiting time the owner would have built the watchtower and the winepress and strengthened the protective wall. But all the hard work had been to no purpose and the waiting was in vain. In the same way the Israelite nation had been lovingly cared for by God. God had taken the man of his choice,

Abraham, and built a nation out of him. He'd redeemed that nation from slavery in Egypt, saved them from the Egyptian army, fed and watered them in the desert and finally established them in his fertile vineyard – the Promised Land. But in the end the results have been disappointing. God had waited for the Israelites to establish themselves in the vineyard of the Promised Land, but instead of Godly righteous people he finds only idolatry, apostasy, immorality and injustice. Again all the effort was to no purpose and the waiting was in vain.

In verses 3 and 4 God asks the Israelites to consider the story of the vineyard and decide who is to blame for the fact that it has yielded “wild” grapes which are bitter and foul smelling. Is it the fault of the owner or the fault of the vineyard? God is saying that the answer is clearly that the vineyard, Israel, is the one who is at fault. The owner has done everything possible. Note the shift in emphasis here. In verses 1 and 2 Isaiah was speaking *for* God now he's speaking *as* God. It's entirely possible for God to do a work for his people, but for them to receive it in vain – hear what Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

“As God's fellow-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.” (2 Corinthians 6:1)

Whatever the Israelites may have thought in response to verses 3 and 4, verses 5 and 6 leave them in no doubt as to what God's response is going to be. He's not just going to abandon the vineyard; he's going to assist in its destruction. He will take down the hedge, which was a stone wall topped by thorn bushes that kept out thieves and destructive animals, so that the vineyard will be devoured and trampled. The vineyard will receive no more pruning, digging, cultivating or watering. It will be allowed to go its own way to its ruin. This is a message of doom. God is saying that Israel will be destroyed.

The first six verses made it very clear that Isaiah was referring to Israel as the vineyard, but to remove any possible doubt, God makes matters absolutely clear in verse 7. He says that he is speaking about

Israel. His message of doom is for the men of Israel. The vineyard is Israel, the source of God's delight and the object of his desire (Isaiah 60:21; 61:3). Yet the fruit of God's labour is not the Godliness, justice and righteousness he had worked for, but instead idolatry, apostasy, oppression and violence. Israel's destruction is left unmentioned. It does not need to be, because once the equation between Israel and the vineyard has been made, the coming of judgment is inevitable and unavoidable. In his first four chapters Isaiah left open some small hope of averting God's judgement through repentance, but in chapter five Isaiah is saying it's too late there is not and will not be any repentance and judgement and disaster are certainly coming. Yes, there is hope, but it's not for taking away the coming judgment – it's too late for that! Salvation can only be realised in the more distant future.

Next, Isaiah specifies the “wild grapes” which Israel has produced. They include greed (vv. 8–10), debauchery (vv. 11–12), arrogance (vv. 18, 19), perversion (vv. 20, 21), and injustice (vv. 22–23). All of these are introduced by the Hebrew word *hōy*, conventionally translated “woe.” This is God's message of tragedy, disaster and hardship which are certainly coming for Israel, but it's also a statement of God's grief, pain and distress. The prophet isn't merely angry and denunciatory. He is also grief-stricken over the sins of his people.

Isaiah starts with the land barons and real estate developers in verses 8 to 10. The rich have bought up all the desirable property leaving the poor in servitude on their own land – obviously ignoring Jewish Law about ownership of land – which was supposed to remain in the family and where this was impossible it had to be returned to them in the Jubilee or fiftieth year. But, God's judgement will be that their real estate deals will not be successful and they will leave behind many vacant houses. At this point we would do well to remember Giles' sermon on the Tenth Commandment – covetousness. Covetousness is always self defeating in the final analysis. Isaiah continues his condemnation of the wealthy in verses 11 to 17 against those who party endlessly and celebrate everything but God. They

have become a nation of drunkards living only for carnal pleasure and the result of this hedonistic lifestyle is that they have forgotten God. The result will be that they will be driven off their land and enjoy very little pleasure. Isaiah's response to this can be summed up in Jesus' words, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Verse 16 is very theologically significant because it tells us plainly that what makes God truly God is not His mystery or power, but His justice and righteousness.

Isaiah moves on in verses 18 to 21 to those who confuse moral issues and think that they know better than God, daring God to punish them. They doubt that God is really active in the world. Now the bitterness of the wild grapes is even more evident. The Israelites are filled with deceit and have mocked God; these verses speak of perversity and conceit. They have not accidentally fallen into sin; they are pulling it to them with ropes. They are choosing evil by their own conscious efforts. The people had also redefined what sin was to accommodate their own low moral standards. They were using God's vocabulary, but not his dictionary definitions. For such a vineyard the only possible course is destruction. Isaiah finishes in verses 22 and 23 with a condemnation of those who twist the truth before the courts for dishonest gain saying that right is wrong and that wrong is right.

Isaiah has already spoken of the destruction of the vineyard, Israel. Now, in verses 25 to 30. Isaiah turns to what the Lord's judgement on Israel is going to be and how the destruction will be accomplished. Isaiah makes it clear that it will be through invasion and conquest which is imminent and will be irresistible. In verse 26, Isaiah makes it clear that the invading nations are not acting on their own initiative; they are the Lord's instrument. These invaders will not be slow, nor will they be half-prepared, with broken sandal-thong or slack equipment belt. Instead, everyone will be intent on the task, with arrows sharpened and bow already strung. The horses' hooves will be as hard as flint, so they will not break down on the journey, and the chariot wheels are turning so fast that they blur like a whirlwind. The sound of the onrushing horde is like the roar of a lion at the moment

of its spring. Like the lion, once this army has seized its prey and begun to drag it off, there will be no one to deliver Israel from its mouth. The invading army's rumble will not only be like the lion's roar, but also like the steady crash of breakers in the sea.

It's a formidable series of images of forthcoming judgment, but the prophecy was real. God's judgment duly arrived and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was carried off into exile by the Assyrians and later Judah was carried off by the Babylonians. Although remnants were preserved in their own lands and some of those who were carried off eventually returned from exile, they were never completely restored and the kingdom of God was taken from their hands and awarded to the whole Christian community, I think the parable of Jesus I mentioned earlier expresses it well:

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (Matthew 21:33-43)

The kingdom of God was extended to the whole Christian community, but before we rejoice about that judgement too much,

let's take a close look at ourselves. Do we see justice or righteousness? Do we try and bear each others burdens and participate in the life of the church? Do we give generously or do we hoard everything for ourselves? Are we growing in our Christian lives or are we still sinful and wilfully disobedient to God? Paul warns us about this:

“If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.” (Romans 11:17-21).

But, we do have a hope and an answer in our saviour Jesus Christ who gave us a more hopeful parable involving vines:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:1-8)

So, if we remain in Christ we will bear much fruit. If we spend time with him, reading his word, praying and listening to him, trying to remain faithful to his teachings and organising our lives in service to him then we WILL remain in him. When we turn to Christ the Holy

Spirit enters into us and begins the work of cleansing us, taking away all our unrighteousness and making us more and more like Jesus. Sometimes this can hurt. Sometimes God disciplines us to get our attention and for our ultimate good. There are times when he allows things to happen which confuse us and cause us pain, but we know that God is steadily working in us making us into his perfect servants, making us more and more like Jesus. God is pruning and training us so that we will bear better, sweeter and more abundant fruit. He doesn't want us to be wild grapes.

A vineyard is a costly thing, a good vineyard in France will cost around €250,000 per hectare, but God's vineyard of his people has cost him much, much more dearly. God sacrificed his only son so that we might be forgiven our sins and adopted as his children. Christ took upon himself not only the judgment foretold by Isaiah, but God's wrath and judgment on the sins of each and every one of us. God has given everything so that we can be his people and so that we can bear good fruit. All God asks of us is that we be connected to the true vine, his son, Jesus Christ and that we remain in him.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer: Through Jesus let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Let us offer him changed lives that bear the fruit of the Spirit as we co-operate with the Holy Spirit working in our lives to make us more and more like Jesus each day.