

ISAIAH 5:1-7 Good grapes

Most of us appreciate fine wine, don't we? When Jay & I were newly married, we were friends with a couple who were really into their wine. They had a 2 bedroom unit in Ryde back then, and the entire 2nd bedroom was filled with racks of wine. Some of the bottles of wine they had collected cost the equivalent of hundreds of dollars each in today's prices. Personally, I could have thought of better ways to spend all that money, but wine was their thing. We felt very spoilt one day when they brought out one of their more expensive bottles of wine to help us celebrate our wedding anniversary.

There is a great deal to know about the mystery of wine quality and the art of winemaking. But the bottom line is, without good grapes a winemaker hasn't got a hope.

Our Old Testament reading today is a simple parable about good grapes. Like all parables, it has one point to make. I'm sure you'll work out what that point is as we look at it.

In the last few weeks, the Old Testament readings have dipped into the books of Hosea and Isaiah. In the few passages so far, we've been given a picture of the impending judgement of God upon his rebellious and unrepentant people.

When we read Isaiah's prophecies of judgment and redemption, it can create something of a dilemma for those of us who know the nature and purposes of God. The question that may come to mind is this: "If God's purpose is to redeem his people and his promise is ultimately to restore them, how can he justify venting his wrath upon his chosen people?"

This could well have been a question in Isaiah's own mind, or perhaps it was a question voiced by the people he preached to - because it's almost in answer to this question, that Isaiah offers "The Song of the Vineyard."

It's essentially a parable. In it Isaiah uses the language of song to speak of God's love for his precious people; but then in the verses to follow he also recounts a series of 'woes' which justify his wrath.

Isaiah begins with a picture of a vineyard: **"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it."**

This was a vineyard where no expense was spared. God chose a rich and fertile hill on which to plant his grapes. It was choice real estate. He worked hard, really hard, digging it and clearing it of stones. Once the soil was rich and ready for planting, he went off to the local nursery and chose the most expensive and promising young vines to plant.

Then he built a watchtower in the middle. Wine growers back then would build a watchtower out of stones, which usually had a little hut on top. The vineyard family would live there during the season, and from this vantage point, they could watch over and protect their harvest from natural predators and thieves.

Then God put in even more effort - he hewed out a wine vat for treading the grapes and making the wine - another labour of love. All was in readiness for a rich and bountiful harvest.

This description of the vineyard made me think of parents who are expecting their first child. Do you remember that event in your own life? I certainly do. If parents are fortunate enough to have a room for the new baby, they busy themselves cleaning and painting it, perhaps putting up new curtains. They set up a beautiful bassinet or cot - or both - and fit the nursery out with everything their little one's heart might desire: the softest of garments, musical mobiles, fluffy toys, cosy blankets. Because of their love for their coming child, they are full of extravagance as they await and anticipate their new child.

This is a picture of God as he entered into his a covenant with Israel. And it's the same picture painted in this simple parable of God as the owner of a vineyard, preparing the ground for a rich and bountiful harvest. V. 7 tells us, "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting."

But something went wrong. In the NIV translation we read:

"Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit."

Isaiah goes on to list the 'bad fruit' through the rest of chapter 5. The things that angered God were these (the msg version):

Isa 5:8 Doom to you who buy up all the houses and grab all the land for yourselves— Evicting the old owners, posting NO TRESPASSING signs, Taking over the country, leaving everyone homeless and landless.

Isa 5:11 Doom to those who get up early and start drinking booze before breakfast, Who stay up all hours of the night drinking themselves into a stupor.

Isa 5:18 Doom to you who use lies to sell evil, who haul sin to market by the truckload,

Isa 5:19 Who say, "What's God waiting for? Let him get a move on so we can see it. Whatever The Holy of Israel has cooked up, we'd like to check it out."

Isa 5:20 Doom to you who call evil good and good evil, Who put darkness in place of light and light in place of darkness, Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

Isa 5:21 Doom to you who think you're so smart, who hold such a high opinion of yourselves!

Isa 5:22 All you're good at is drinking—champion boozers who collect trophies from drinking bouts

Isa 5:23 And then line your pockets with bribes from the guilty while you violate the rights of the innocent.

When God saw his people acting like this, it's not hard to understand his disappointment and pain. We hear it all through the book of Hosea.

And the result? We find it in v4-6

“What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

The judgement that fell on God's people came to pass when he withdrew his protection. The Israelites were the vineyard. With the walls down, the surrounding nations were able to move in and conquer the people. Without the Spirit of God in their midst, briers and thorns grew up and took over the vineyard, and without rain, they became dry and parched.

Have you found the point of the parable?

Put into a single sentence, it might read, **“God looks for good grapes; bad grapes will be destroyed.”**

The picture of the culture that caused God so much grief is not so far removed from our own.

Each one of the ‘woes’ described in v8-23 is rampant all around us: Greed and acquisitiveness - the grabbing of resources by the few, leaving the many destitute; drunkenness and other excesses; self-deceit, self-justification, self-aggrandisement; and injustice - such injustice! I can't help thinking of Nauru right now....It's all there, isn't it?

The call to us from this parable is to make sure that we as God's people, are producing good grapes! What are good grapes?

How about you give me some feedback?

Instead of greed - what? Generosity

Instead of drunkenness and other excesses? Moderation

Instead of self-deceit? As Paul says in Rom 12:3 - **Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.**

Instead of self-justification? Trust in Christ, knowing we are justified by faith.

Instead of trusting in our own wisdom? Trusting in God's wisdom

Instead of Injustice? Fighting for the poor and marginalised.

There is another picture of good fruit in the letter to the Galatians. (5:22-23)

You'll know the verse:

The fruit of the Spirit is is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The word 'fruit' incidentally, is a singular noun in the original Greek. It's not 'fruits' of the spirit, with each of these things being a separate fruit. So we can't tick them off and say to ourselves, "well, I'm ok with most of those - it's only patience I have trouble with... or it's only self control I lack"

It's one fruit. It's a mandarin or an orange, not a basket of different fruits. So if we're lacking patience, or we're lacking joy or whatever, it's our entire fruit that needs work!

How can we promote healthy fruit in our lives as Christians? How can we make sure that we are pleasing God by being good grapes?

The key is simply abiding in Jesus. Staying plugged into him, if you like.

Staying connected to him - and to his people the church.

If we do that, then the life of Jesus himself flows through our veins.

Let me finish with the same metaphor from Jesus himself. He says in John 15:5:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Let's pray..