

Call to Worship

Whatever gains we have
we come to regard them as loss because of Christ.

More than that, we regard everything as loss
because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

So come, set aside all that clings to us and drags us down;
we come to worship God, our Source, Guide, and Goal, the Eternal Trinity.

Prayers of Approach

We come before You, O Most High,
and praise You for Your many gifts;
for the nurturing care You show us
like rich soil in which we can grow;
the loving kindness You shower on us as refreshing rain,
the ways in which You feed us
that we may bear fruit that will last.
For all Your gifts we thank and praise You.

We come before You, O Risen Lord Jesus,
and praise You for Your many gifts;
You teach and inspire us,
You call us to follow You,
to care for others and to proclaim Your Kingdom which surpasses all earthly realms.
For all Your gifts we thank and praise You.

We come before You, Most Holy Spirit,
and praise You for Your many gifts;
You open the Word to us,
helping us to explore, understand, and obey.
You help us to love – even the unlovely –
and inspire us to go beyond the boundaries
of the safety of our own vineyards.
For all Your gifts we thank and praise You.

Eternal Trinity of Love,
we praise and worship You, and
for all Your gifts we thank and praise You. Amen.

Prayers of Confession and Grace

We are the Church, God's vineyard:
planted with great care, tended and loved, watered and guarded by the Most High.

We were designed to be fruitful,
to be a sign of life, love, and liberation in the world,
to proclaim salvation and embody God's loving kindness:
**yet we rejected God's messengers,
have used violence to maintain power and privilege,
and have even justified murder.**

We await the owner's return in trepidation,
praying it's not too late to mend our ways.
**Forgive us, good Lord, give us time to change,
and the grace to respond. Amen**

Press on, dear friends, towards the goal,
the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus!
Trust in His faithfulness and resurrection,
for your forgiveness is not earned but is given as a costly gift;
so rejoice in the Lord,
accept the forgiveness offered to you,
and live a fruitful life.

Introduction to the Readings

Three of our readings today are concerned with an image of the Vineyard. In our passage from Isaiah, the prophet sees Israel as God's vineyard which was nurtured with great care but, yielding only sour grapes due to wilful disobedience would be neglected by God. The Psalmist laments God's neglect of the people asking why and our Gospel reading has Jesus retelling the parable of the vineyard to show that the leaders of the people would be replaced by more faithful tenders of the vines – presumably by Peter and the disciples. As we wonder what Jesus might be telling us through that parable we hear the reading from Philippians where Paul asserts that no matter what we have, what our lineage is, we can only depend on Christ's faithfulness.

Prayer for Illumination

Enrich the poor soil of our hearts, O God,

that Your word will put down roots,
grow shoots, and bear good fruit in our lives. Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 5:1-7 | Psalm 80: 7-15 | St Matthew 21:33-46 | Philippians 3: 1-14

All Age Activity

A simple, highly visual craft that scales perfectly for different skill levels to reflect the "yield" God looks for.

For Little Ones: Provide pre-cut purple paper circles. They can glue them into a bunch of grapes onto a vine leaf template.

For Older children & Adults: Give them strips of purple paper to roll into 3D loops, gluing them together to form a textured, realistic grape cluster. On each grape, have participants write one "good fruit" or action they can produce this week (e.g., sharing, listening, praying, helping a neighbour). Hang all the clusters on a branch at the front of the church.

Or

A sensory lesson that hits home for all ages regarding Isaiah 5:4 (*"Why, when I looked for good grapes, did it yield wild grapes?"*).

- Bring in a bowl of beautiful, deeply purple grapes and a bowl of fresh lemons cut into wedges.
- Let everyone take one of each.
- Have them eat the sweet grape first, describing the joy of a good harvest.
- Then, have them taste the sour lemon.
- Explain that God looked at the people expecting the sweetness of justice and righteousness, but instead found the sour bitterness of cruelty and selfishness.

And

All-Age Discussion Starters

If you break into mixed-age tables or small groups, use these simple prompts that a 7-year-old can answer but a 70-year-old can deeply ponder:

1. Ownership: In the parable, the tenants forgot that the vineyard didn't belong to them. What are things in our lives that we treat like they belong to us, but actually belong to God?

2. Expectations: If God looked at our community or family right now like a gardener looking at a garden, what kind of "fruit" do you think God would be happiest to find?
3. The Son: The landowner sent his son, thinking, "*They will respect my son.*" How do we show respect and love to God's Son, Jesus, in our daily choices?

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

Mary Mills (Jerome, T & T Clark, 2022) notes that the first part of the book we know as Isaiah dates from the 8th Century before Christ at the time of the Assyrian Empire. In today's passage the Song of the Vineyard is set out as a parable with vv 3-4 contrasting the care given to the vineyard with its later neglect in the verses which follow. In Isaiah 1 a vineyard is an agricultural metaphor, and in 3 as a metaphor for greed, now it's about the whole social order. Divine nurture turns to divine rejection after a lack of loyalty from the people. The land will be abandoned and not protected against the wild beasts.

John Goldingay (Abingdon, 2010) notes this is a love song -something which seems odd to contemporary readers but would not have seemed so in the Ancient Near East. In case the hearers missed the point v7 makes clear that Israel is the vineyard. There's some word play in v7 in Hebrew which the writer uses to make points and contrasts; God expected *mishpat* (justice) but received only *mispakh* (literally flowing as in blood flowing), *tsedaqa* (righteousness) is wanted but *tse'aa* (a cry) is what is delivered. Goldingay notes the word used for Israel's own cry under Egyptian oppression now comes from the lips of the people oppressed by their fellow Israelites.

Benjamin D Somer (Jewish Publication Society/OUP, 2014) notes that at first the identity of the farmer and the vineyard is not revealed and, only gradually, is the truth revealed that the listeners themselves are being rebuked. Nathan's parable to David (after the rape of Bathsheba and murder of her husband) are structured the same way in 2 Sam 12. The purpose of the parable is to show the listeners that they can't refute the allegations made against them. The JPS translation tries to get the wordplay noted above "and He hoped for justice but behold, injustice; for equity, but behold iniquity!"

Like the Gospel reading, where Jesus develops this parable, the sting is in the tail. What does the story say to us? Have we, the Church or local churches, been nurtured and cared for but only return rottenness? If so, might there be consequences about God's care turning to neglect – might God not wish to force Himself upon us? This is not as neat as to say Church decline is about a lack of obedience but might be something about a failure to understand the social movements over which we have no control and only a very little understanding of how to respond. In Isaiah's time the threat was the Assyrian Empire which would, eventually, overrun the northern kingdom of Israel. There are, of course, many threats to our security in the West in general and the UK in particular but what

threats might there be to the Church (if we were to read this parable as having something to say to the Church)? How one answers this might depend on one's theological presuppositions but perhaps we've too keenly allied ourselves with society as it is rather than hold up a vision of the better world outlined in the Gospels?

Psalms 80

The Psalm echoes the Isaiah reading reflecting on the breaches of the vineyard asking why God had allowed this. Answers to the question can be found in the Isaiah reading. We might cry to God asking why bad things are allowed to happen; often forgetting our part (as individuals and as humanity as a whole) in making the world as it is.

St Matthew

Hauerwas (*SCM Press 2006*) notes that this episode is in the final stages of Jesus' ministry after his political entry into Jerusalem itself and the Temple which had challenged the legitimacy of the authorities. It came immediately after an argument with the chief priests and elders about the source of Jesus' own authority – the authority to teach and the authority to clear the Temple of its traders. This story is in response to their question and involves a trap. Jesus asked the chief priests and elders what the owner of the vineyard would do to those who had killed his son and they respond "they will bring those wretches to a wretched end and lead the vineyard to other tenants". Jesus makes clear, though his quotation from Ps 118 and his direct "I tell you then, that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." leading them to want to arrest him rather than repent. Hauerwas suggests that for contemporary readers instead of seeing this as a rejection of Judaism as interpreters often have (Jesus and the earliest Christians after all were Jewish) it's a story where we should, like the chief priests and elders, see where **we** are condemned in the story. Are we filled with a "prideful presumption" that the story has nothing to say to us? Christians, notes Hauerwas, are "tempted to rule like tyrants, believing we possess the truth, a universal truth available without suffering..." Matthew, however, makes clear we can't know the truth of Jesus without training to be a disciple; discipleship always involves suffering and leaves no time for deciding who's in and who's out!

Aaron M Gale (OUP, 2011) notes this is a reworking of the earlier parable in Isaiah 5: 1 – 7 (our first reading today) Here the "tenants" are clearly code for the chief priests and pharisees and the "slaves" code for the Jewish prophets who were sent to Israel with God's message. Of course, the "son" in the story is Jesus himself. The phrase in v39 "out of the vineyard" where the Son was killed might refer to Jesus' death, outside of Jerusalem, at Golgotha.

Stephen Westerholm (Abingdon, 2010) notes that Jesus reworks the original parable in Isaiah where the vineyard produced bad fruit. In Matthew good produce comes but the tenants refuse to hand it over, mistreat the messengers sent to get the produce, and eventually the malice and mistreatment ends in murder. The line from the chief priests and elders about the wicked tenants receiving their comeuppance is used by Jesus to

show he will be vindicated after his death.

Ian Boxall (T & T Clark, 2022) notes how the tension is building in this passage and now Matthew adds more to this episode than Mark; numerous slaves are killed reflecting Jewish history where prophets had been stoned and killed; in Mark the son is killed then thrown out of the vineyard, in Matthew he's thrown out then killed reflecting Jesus' later death. Boxall notes that in other parables the hearers are left to puzzle out the meaning but here Jesus makes the meaning crystal clear and the Jewish leaders understand themselves to be at the sharp end of the meaning. Boxall looks at vv 43-44 saying some interpret the new tenants as the Church, others as gentiles or, perhaps more faithful to the sense of the text, the chief priests and elders will be replaced by Peter and the apostles.

How good have we been at tending the Lord's vineyard? Might the Lord be getting new staff or might we think he is? (large newer and livelier churches might seem to be what the Lord is up to but scandals are found there too with people further alienated from the Gospel). Do we worry more about who's in and who's out than we do about our own discipleship? What has our discipleship cost us?

Philippians

Michael Cook (OUP, 2011) notes contemporary scholars see this work was written in the mid 50s whilst Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus. The letter is the first Paul wrote to a congregation he established on European soil. In establishing the church, he sailed from Turkey to Macedonia in Northern Greece (see Acts 16: 11 – 40) and then a 10 mile road trip would have taken him to Philippi. Paul thanks the congregation who, despite their poverty, had sent him funds several times; he sends the letter with Epaphroditus from whom he'd learned of the problems the church was facing. Paul warmly thanks the congregation, assesses his own circumstances and prospects for release and offers advice on the problems he'd heard about. Paul affirms joyful proclamation of the Gospel even in the face of adversity. He urges humility and unity – showing Jesus as the exemplar here. Today's passage does seem to devalue Paul's own Jewish heritage. The immediate context for the passage is "beware of the dogs" who seem to be adversaries from outside Philippi who might soon arrive. It's not clear who they were – they could have been Jewish Christians, or Gentile Christians who held to the Jewish Law, or they might even be Jewish agitators wanting to win back Gentile god-fearers who had become Christians. They argued that Gentiles needed to be circumcised; Paul calls them mutilators (perhaps thinking of the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18 who mutilated themselves in ecstatic frenzies). Paul was concerned not to emphasise "the flesh" ie his ethnic identity but the grace of God which comes through faith in Christ's shed blood. If one was made righteous by one's own works there'd be no need for Jesus to have died. Paul gives a long account of why, in ethnic "flesh" terms he has the privileges of which the dogs will boast but reminds his readers of the extreme gain in knowing Jesus. Paul's depreciation of his Jewish background is only in this context – look up Romans 9: 4-5 where he praises this background.

J Ross Wagner (Abingdon, 2010) notes Philippi was the civic centre of a largely rural Roman colony with a population made up of Greeks, Romans, Thracians and various foreigners. The small Christian congregation would have been surrounded by constant reminders of the power and glory of Rome. Wagner notes the language is shocking to modern sensibilities but quite common in ancient polemics. Paul does not, Wagner notes, disparage his Judaism nor his former life as a Pharisee but says, instead, what he has gained in Christ Jesus surpasses this. Indeed, Wagner sees the recounting his pedigree as being something Paul was proud of. Yet compared to what he found in Christ, he sees all that he achieved before as loss.

PHEME PERKINS (T & T Clark, 2022) notes Paul is seeking to show that one can't rely on externals to show one is part of the Covenant people – not even with his impressive list of what he now saw as externals. Participating in the suffering of the Crucified Christ through the hardships and imprisonments Paul faced meant he is qualified for a share in the resurrection.

How much do we rely on our membership of the Church, involvement in its life (and rotas) more than we rely on Christ's faithful example? It's easy to believe that somehow we have to earn our salvation rather than trust? Yet, at the same time what might we make of Paul's assertion that he, and presumably us, have to share in Christ's passion? We enjoy sharing the resurrection, of course, but taking up our crosses in a journey of discipleship where we have to sacrifice is not something we relish.

Commentaries noted

Matthew, Stanley Hauerwas, SCM Press 2006

The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century (T & T Clark, 2022)

The Jewish Annotated New Testament (OUP, 2011)

The Jewish Study Bible (Jewish Publication Society/OUP, 2014)

The New Interpreter's One Volume Commentary (Abingdon, 2010)

Affirmation of Faith

Let us proclaim the faith of the Church through the ages:

We believe in the one and only God, Eternal Trinity,
from whom, through whom and for whom all created things exist.
God alone we worship; in God we put our trust.

We worship God, source and sustainer of creation,
whom Jesus called Father,
whose sons and daughters we are.

We worship God revealed in Jesus Christ,
who lived our human life,
died for sinners on the Cross;
who was raised from the dead,
and proclaimed by the apostles, Son of God;
**who lives eternally, as saviour and sovereign,
coming in judgement and mercy, to bring us to eternal life.**

We worship God, ever present in the Holy Spirit;
who brings this Gospel to fruition, assures us of forgiveness,
**strengthens us to do God's will,
and makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus,
sons and daughters of God.**

We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,
united in heaven and on earth:
on earth, the Body of Christ,
**empowered by the Spirit to glorify God
and to serve humanity;
in heaven, eternally one with the power,
the wisdom and the love of God in Trinity.**

We believe that, in the fullness of time,
God will renew and gather in one
all things in heaven and on earth through Christ,
and be perfectly honoured and adored.
**We rejoice in God who has given us being,
who shares our humanity to bring us to glory,
our source of prayer and power of praise;
to whom be glory, praise and adoration,
now and evermore. Amen.**

*The URC's 1997 Statement of Faith
as set out in the Baptism service*

Intercessions

We bring our prayers to God for the world, the Church and ourselves. Let us pray.

O Most High,
You tend the world as a vinedresser tends her vineyard,
caring for the vines, measuring nutrients, clearing weeds,
and pruning dead wood to ensure a good harvest.
We pray for all who tend the land growing food for us to eat,
battling a changing climate and all the pressure that brings.
We pray too for farmers seeking a fair price for their crops,
and scientists learning how we can adapt to new difficult realities.

And for ourselves , Most High, help us to adjust our habits and expectations, that we eat more sustainably and adapt to the changing world.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Risen Lord,

Your power is only truly known in weakness;

Your peace comes to us through the violence of the Cross,

Your welcome is broad, but Your way is narrow.

Give us the grace to follow You,

to count our possessions, wealth, status and security as loss

when compared to the treasure that is ours in knowing You.

Help us to hear Your parables afresh,

to see where we've been wicked tenants,

and to change our ways before we're replaced.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Most Holy Spirit,

You fill the earth with Your loving energy,

You sustain all that is,

lead us to know the truth,

and guide us into life.

Bless those we know and love who are in any kind of need...

and bless us as we seek to be better disciples....

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Eternal Trinity of Love,

hear our cries as we pray as Jesus taught saying...

Offertory

We show our faith in so many ways – coming to worship is but one. How we live our lives, how we treat others, showing love to the lovely and unlovely alike and demonstrating, in love and action, the grace of God. We also show our faith through our giving. When we spend time with another needing our help, love, presence, and support we're giving. When we are inconvenienced to go to another's aid we're showing our faith. When we sit with the dying and walk with the living we're showing our faith. Of course, when we give money to charities at home and abroad, and to the church whether in the little envelopes, direct to the bank or in the plate we're giving and embodying our faith. So, let's give thanks for all that's given.

God of every blessing,

we thank You for the gifts that abound in this congregation,

gifts of love and labour, time and tenderness,

care and creativity, genius and generosity.
Bless our gifts, help us to use them wisely,
that Your loving kindness may be embodied here. Amen.

Holy Communion

Invitation

Let us celebrate this joyful feast. People will come from east and west and north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Anyone who comes to me I will never turn away.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation.
Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
which earth has given and human hands have made.
May it become for us the bread of life.

Blessed be God for ever.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation.
Through your goodness we have this wine to offer,
fruit of the vine and the work of human hands.
May it become for us the cup of salvation.

Blessed be God for ever.

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation.
Through your goodness we have ourselves to offer,
fruit of the womb, and formed by your love.
May we become your servants in the world.

Blessed be God for ever.

Narrative of the Institution

Hear the narrative of the institution of the Lord's Supper as it is recorded by St Paul.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. In the same way he took the cup also, after Supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We offer you thanks, Creator, Saviour, Giver of Life.

From the beginning you have made yourself known:

the heavens proclaim your glory and the earth sings your praise.

In wisdom you made all that is and you bless us with earth's fruitfulness.

You are merciful and gracious, and abounding in love.

Long ago you called to yourself a people

to shine as light to guide all nations to your presence.

You led them to freedom;

you revealed to them your Law and taught them through your prophets.

Finally, you sent your promised Son, Jesus Christ,

who shared our human nature and understood our weakness.

Born of Mary, he showed forth your love by word and sign.

Therefore, with all your people in heaven and on earth

we sing the triumphant hymn of your glory:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts

Heaven and earth are full of your glory

Hosanna in the highest

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the lord

Hosanna in the highest.

Jesus sought the unloved and the lost and welcomed all who came to him;

he taught us lessons of forgiveness,

he brought us healing for our sickness,

and showed us how to live according to your will.

For this he was rejected,

for this he endured grief and sorrow,

for this he gave himself up to death upon the Cross.

But you broke the power of sin and death and raised him to the heights,

that through the blood of his Cross and by the gift of the Holy Spirit

everything in earth and heaven might be reconciled to you.

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Come, Creator God: renew the face of the earth;

come, eternal Saviour: remake us in your likeness;
come, Holy Spirit, transform these gifts:
that Christ may be known to us in the breaking of the bread
and that we may be strengthened to serve him in the world.
May we on earth be one with all Christ's people,
and, when all things are complete, be raised up to be with him,
and with all your faithful servants in the heavenly places,
the homeland which we seek by faith,
and where he reigns in glory, with you, Father, and the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever. Amen.

Holy things for a holy people.

Only one is holy, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are made holy in him.

The bread of heaven in Christ Jesus.

The cup of salvation in Christ Jesus.

Post Communion Prayer

God of a love stronger than death,
you have given us new birth into a living hope through the gift of your Son.
God with us, like a mother you have fed us with yourself
and strengthened us for journeying ahead.
God of truth and power,
you take our weakness and our sin and refashion us by grace.
Gracious God, may the love which bids us welcome at this table
gather all your children into one, in your eternal presence,
whole and free at last. Amen.

Blessing

May the One who is the Owner of the Vineyard,
the One who is the Good Vine,
and the One who nurtures and refreshes
guard you, feed you, and make you fruitful
that you produce good not sour fruit,
and the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, Enlivening Spirit
be with you all, now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
<i>Psalm 80</i>				
God of Hosts You Chose A Vine		51		
Jesus, Saviour, Lord Now To You I Fly (Saranam, Saranam)		573		
The Right Hand of God	91	709	715	
<i>Philippians</i>				
All I once held dear		506	489	799
When I Survey the Wondrous Cross	217	392	287	755
Jesus Lover of My Soul	332	490	355	372
<i>Gospel</i>				
My Song is Love Unknown	207	399	277	478
Christ Is Made The Sure Foundation	559	200	677	73
I Danced In the Morning	195	404	247	
The Church's One Foundation	566	739	690	640
Christ Triumphant Ever Reigning		436	319	77
We Have A Gospel to Proclaim		363	418	728

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise