

## Reflection for the Twenty Seventh Sunday of the Church's Year

Many people like to lose themselves in a good book, TV drama or film, to experience the build up of tension, suspense, tragedy, horror or mystery. Sadly, most of us do not have the same experience with the gospels because we never read a whole gospel, or we don't read them as thrillers or dramas, and at church we read sanitized snippets robbed of all context. This is illustrated by a simple question about today's gospel which most of us would struggle to answer. At what point in his public ministry did Jesus tell this parable?

So, let's try and put the drama back into the encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders in today's gospel. The atmosphere is charged and tense. Jerusalem is bursting with pilgrims who have arrived for Passover and Jesus is the talking point on everyone's lips. The religious leaders are hostile to Jesus and worried that the stir he is causing will upset the Roman occupiers. Jesus has heightened these fears by causing chaos in the Temple driving out the animals for sacrifice and overturning the money changers' tables. It's the Monday of Holy Week and Jesus is rounding on the religious authorities in a full-on attack. The impact of this encounter is that *"the chief priests and Pharisees perceived that he was speaking about them"* and *"were seeking to arrest him"* but *"they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet."* As we read this passage the tension, the drama ought to be palpable but, cut off from its context, it is lost.

In speaking about a vineyard Jesus chooses a provocative subject calculated to touch a raw nerve. The chief priests and the elders would be familiar with the prophet Isaiah's words in our first reading in which the people of Israel are condemned for failing to produce good fruit. The opening words of Jesus' parable that *"the master planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a wine press in it and built a tower"* are deliberately intended to echo the words of Isaiah which the prophet describes as *"a love song concerning the vineyard."* God had *"built it on a very fertile hill...dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines, built a watchtower in the midst of it"* but, for all God's lavish care, *"the house of Israel, and the men of Judah"* had yielded only *"wild grapes."* The chief priests and elders already knew that Isaiah was referring to the infidelity of the chosen people and now, as Jesus speaks, they recognised themselves as the murderous, usurping tenants of his parable. They may also have picked up on Jesus' identification of himself as *"the son"* and *"heir"* of the master of the vineyard. Imagine the tension, the drama in the air; no wonder that *"they were seeking to arrest him."*

When we read our Sunday gospel passage knowing its context we get so much more out of it and I do encourage everyone to read a gospel from start to finish as a thriller, as a drama. And specifically arising out of today's gospel, let us remember the love that God has lavished upon us, his very own vineyard, and be sure to produce good fruit rather than wild grapes.