

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity  
October 8, 2017

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All through the Bible the most frequent description of the people of God is as a *vineyard*. The chosen people is planted and tended by Almighty God. Beyond the boundaries of the law and observance of the customs of God are people who are *not* God's chosen. What this means is that when those who are inside the vineyard go beyond the border they cease to be a part of Israel. Motives, feelings, and degrees of sincerity do not change the fact of having crossed the boundary. With a vineyard the boundary is well defined. People can see the orderliness of what is cultivated on one side and the randomness of thicket, bramble, brier, and rocks on the other. Regarding the chosen people, there is God's law on one side and the confusion of competing and fickle interests and division on the other.

In ancient times God's people and God's church were a single entity. There were no notions of secular and sacred and no separation of church and state. This was not to deny the friction and confrontation between God's prophets and the various kings of Judah and Israel. But what was at issue was fidelity to, or corruption of, God's law, which was recognized as affecting every aspect of the people's life. No one believed in the non-existence of God or that His claim was not pervasive. The prophets regaled the various kings not only about religious matters. They brought God's moral and ethical demands to bear on the practice of law, medicine, diplomacy, military, agriculture, mining, education, manufacturing, and every other endeavor of His people, commercial, social, and professional.

In the Old Testament we recognize a material worldview gradually replacing the spiritual. The parable that is today's gospel shows the conflict. Almighty God is like the owner of the vineyard. He is out of sight. And from that fact it is easy to conclude that if God is out of sight He is also out of existence or doesn't care. And if that is the case then human beings do not have any rival for mastery of the universe. And because it is God's creation, left to their own pursuits they make a mess of it.

In the parable the Lord shows what happens when the little world of me-myself-and-I fails to take into consideration the larger reality that creation is God's place and design. And so the secular mind-set resents the Church just as it did the prophets, seeing her as a mere set of vested interests attached to an irrelevant past

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and resistant of progressive change. We are seen as having no claim on any sphere of life beyond the private aspirations of our own adherents. When the Church weighs in on any of the affairs of society: politics, commercial activity, education, family life, she is seen as meddling beyond her competence as defined by the new thinking.

Christ's parable shows the final insanity of this drift. Society, refusing to comply with the demands of God attempts to kill Him through His son. *Killing God is seen as progress*. And all of a sudden what began to sound like a modern problem is revealed as being the old story. When Caiaphas counseled that it was expedient for one man to die than for the entire nation to suffer, he was simply reworking the primitive impulse to gain someone's power by killing him. That is something a cave man or cannibal would understand. The only difference is that the thoroughly-modern Caiaphas re-packed his atavism in the jargon of "sound political reasoning."

The parable of the Lord was given to His disciples when they were ready to have the whole drama of human history put before them. But it was given in veiled form. In the Garden of Eden man and woman were exiled because of disobedience. In Christ's parable it is *God's* exile that is attempted by His creature. God's Own Son is killed, but not before it is established that He is "the beloved Son" and whose credentials are therefore from the Father. It was to help His followers understand all this that the Lord Jesus told the Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

The followers of Jesus also needed to be told about the Resurrection. And again in veiled form this is actually given in the form of a proverb taken from Psalm 118. It tells of a stone, which is rejected by the builders and yet in the end is set in the place of honor. And so the parable of the Lord summed up the whole drama of man's relationship with his Creator, telling us that as the headstone of the corner, Christ will reign over the world in glory. And those who oppose Him shall be scattered as dust.