

We spoke, on the Sunday before last, of how God's justice differs from our own:

*In God's realm, justice ....does not mean getting what we deserve, either in terms of retribution for wrong doing or recompense for good deeds*

to quote from the New Collegeville Biblical Commentary once again. But here, in today's readings, surely the unjust tenants are getting exactly what they deserve. In the passage from Isaiah these are cast as *the inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah* and in Matthew's gospel as the *chief priests and elders of the people* and Matthew is writing after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem when it would seem that both Isaiah's prophecy and the words of Jesus have been vindicated: the people of Jerusalem and Judah or, at least, some of them, have got what they deserved. This is where we must be very careful in our reading of how God does or doesn't intervene in history. We like to interpret God's interventions in a specific, causal way, punishing us when we disobey the commandments and rewarding us when we do as we're told. But God's intervention in history isn't of this nature at all. It's of a different order altogether: sustaining us in being unless we choose otherwise, unless we choose to act as if this were not so: loving us to an infinite degree unless we choose to believe and act as if this were no longer so. We described it previously as 'living within an economy of gift', stepping *into* the flow of God's grace or stepping *out* of it. What the people of Jerusalem and Judah, or some of them in these stories, have done, or are being warned against, is acting as if God's sustaining love no longer matters. They can 'go it alone', deciding for themselves who to favour and not to favour; living as if all is within their own gift and not the gift of God.

This failing is not confined to the people of Israel; it has a universal reference. This is where Israel becomes a paradigm for us all and why, what happens in Jerusalem even now, matters for the rest of us. What God is defending here is Israel as a *light to the nations*, and what is important to notice, both in the passage from Isaiah and in the gospel, is that God does not destroy his vineyard but, in Isaiah, simply leaves it to go its own way and, in Matthew, leaves the vineyard *to other tenants who will deliver the produce to him when the season arrives*. This, too, is a universal dynamic. In Isaiah, the tenants are being allowed to live as if outside God's economy of gift, that is as if God withdraws his sustaining grace, and the vineyard becomes a wasteland. Look at what our present greed is doing to the planet! In the gospel, God sends his own son and we crucify him and continue to do so when we follow our own way. This is why Christ is as relevant today as ever for, as God lives, so does his Christ, and our living without reference to Christ and God's economy of gift, is as absurd now as then. For, ultimately, we cannot kill God or God's all-sustaining nature. Resurrection is, firstly, not about us and our vain hopes for survival after death, but about the nature of God. God is love and nothing we can do will change that. The invitation is to live as if God matters and so share in this resurrection, this never-ending love, this never-ending life of God.

Br John Mayhead  
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour