

The world is God's workplace and the work God is undertaking is one of establishing peace and justice for all people. His chosen workplace is in one of the most contested regions on earth, that narrow strip of land bordering the Mediterranean on its eastern flank – a few fertile acres before the mountains and deserts of Arabia. Its position has always made it vulnerable to the movements and passions of its neighbours: the Persians, the Greeks, the Egyptians and the Romans have all coveted its land both for its rich produce and its strategic position. And yet it is here, rather than in some invulnerable Shangri-la, that God chooses to place a people dedicated to forming a just society, as a light to the nations, as a proof that justice and peace are possible for all. I've emphasised this aspect of God's plan because we can readily forget that it is crucial to God's religious vision, that is, to the work of Israel and his Chosen People. This is the message of the prophets time and time again; it's not the majesty and magnificence of your worship that matters or the size of your temples or the beauty of your liturgy, but your relationship with one another and with the stranger, the beginnings of that love of one's enemies which comes to fruition in Jesus.

In this respect, we are God's temple or, in the language of today's parable, God's vineyard, God's vine. The parable is particularly directed at the religious leaders of the day, some of the Pharisees, some of the Scribes and Sadducees and the Herodians, too. Its purpose is not to replace Judaism with a new faith, a new religion, but to restore it to its original purpose, to make it once again a true witness of God's intentions for all. But the religious leaders of its time ignore its true purpose and set out to kill the messenger, instead, but the messenger, this time, is God's Son. It's a culminating moment; a once and for all event; an offer or offering which is definitive, defining not only who God is – prepared to send himself, one might say, in the person of his son – but defining us, too, in our reaction. We have a choice between peace and violence here, in our own relations with one another and the stranger, and God. So it has a universal import and when we see violence once more in the Holy Land we need to remind ourselves once more of Israel's history and purpose – there not for its own ends only, to make itself strong and supposedly secure, but to cultivate peace and justice for all: a light to the nations including us. And we are that Israel, too, here for others and not for ourselves. *See how these Christians love one another* is our starting place – the place of vulnerability where God's work is most clearly seen. To be somewhat cynical, if we can achieve peace among ourselves, or better, allow God to work this for us or in us, then the rest of the world can have hope too. Israel then as the most impossible place and yet God's chosen people.