

October 2, 2011

**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

Sermon at All Saints' Atlanta Kanuga Weekend

*The Rt. Rev. Peter James Lee*

**Fruitful Lives**

The Bible has a green thumb. It says a lot about vineyards and the expectation that they will be fruitful. Vineyards—then and now in the Holy Land—are loved by their owners. The prophet Isaiah tells of a vineyard with a love song.

But the beloved vineyard ended badly. It produced only wild grapes. So the owner of the vineyard decided to make it a waste, overgrown with briars and thorns.

Isaiah used the vineyard as a metaphor for the people whom God has planted and from whom he expected justice but instead saw only bloodshed.

In the story of the vineyard that Jesus tells, remembered in St. Matthew's gospel, it's not the vineyard itself that failed expectations but the tenants of the vineyard who abused the owners' servants and finally killed his son.

The first thing to say about the vineyard stories is a penitential admission that over the long course of Christian history, these stories have sometimes been used in anti-Semitic slurs against the entire Jewish people.

But God never rejects his covenant people, Jewish or Gentile Christian.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting." It is not the Jewish people who are rejected, but any religious or political leader who fails to meet God's expectations of justice, leaders who fail God as well as fail the people. The prayer of the psalmist remains, "Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted." (Ps. 80:14)

God loves God's people and the creation God intended for the people. The vineyard images of the Bible teach us that God has given us a good creation. The Book of Genesis tells us that when God saw what God had made, it was very good. Psalm 104 sings joyfully of the abundance of creation:

You send the springs into the valleys;  
they flow between the mountains.  
All the beasts of the field drink their fill from them,  
and the wild asses quench their thirst.  
Beside them the birds of the air make their nests  
and sing among the branches.  
You water the mountains from your dwelling on high;  
the earth is fully satisfied by the fruit of your works.

You make grass grow for flocks and herds  
 and plants to serve mankind;  
 That they may bring forth food from the earth,  
 and wine to gladden our hearts,

It's very appropriate to sing of God's creation here at Kanuga where sustainability has been a practice at Kanuga since it first opened in 1905. Since it became connected to the Episcopal Church in 1928, Kanuga has paid attention to stewardship of God's creation here. A storm in 1936 brought down a number of large trees. The wood was milled on site and two years later used in construction of this chapel.

We are beginning to discover all through the Bible the recurring theme that we are responsible for stewardship of the creation God has made. So the unfolding environmental crisis of the earth becomes for people of faith a religious and moral challenge as well as political, scientific and economic issues.

We are placed on the earth to bear fruit, both literally and metaphorically. God has commanded us to bring forth sufficient fruit that all may be fed, and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we are empowered to produce in our lives the fruits of the Spirit.

Last week, meeting in Quito, Ecuador, the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church issued a Pastoral Teaching that included these words:

*"Affirming the biblical witness to God's abiding and all-encompassing love for creation, we recognize that we cannot separate ourselves as humans from the rest of the created order. The creation story itself presents the interdependence of all God's creatures in their wonderful diversity and fragility, and in their need of protection from dangers of many kinds. This is why the church prays regularly for the peace of the whole world, for seasonable weather and an abundance of the fruits of the earth, for a just sharing of resources, and for the safety of all who suffer."*

Today is the Sunday closest to the commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi on October 4. Across the world today, thousands of congregations will have some form of the blessing of animals, reminding us of God's bounty and of our responsibility for our fellow creatures with whom we share our lives.

The Christian faith has enduring themes—God's creation is one of them. And in changing times, reflection on those enduring themes bring new insights to enrich new times.

I hope we will leave Kanuga today with a renewed sense of thanksgiving for the different vineyards God has given us, and renewed conviction to tend them lovingly and to bring forth the fruit that God expects.